



CABINET – 17 DECEMBER 2024

**CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE STRATEGY - OUTCOME OF
CONSULTATION**

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE RESOURCES

PART A

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to advise the Cabinet of the outcome of the consultation on the draft Customer Experience Strategy and to seek approval of the Strategy, which is attached as Appendix A to this report.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that the Cabinet:
 - a) Notes the outcome of consultation on the draft Customer Experience Strategy;
 - b) Approves the Customer Experience Strategy 2024-2028;
 - c) Notes that an Action Plan will be developed to support the implementation of the Strategy.

Reasons for Recommendation

3. To note the feedback received during the consultation exercise on the draft Strategy which has informed the final version.
4. The Strategy will set the direction for the Council's interaction with customers and help ensure transparency and consistency in its approach.

Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)

5. A public consultation exercise took place from 14 September 2024 to 10 November 2024 to seek views on the proposed Customer Experience Strategy.
6. The Scrutiny Commission considered a report on 6 November 2024 as part of the consultation process and its comments are set out in Part B of this report.

7. Following approval from the Cabinet, an Action Plan to tackle priority areas for the year ahead will be presented to the Scrutiny Commission for consideration in the new year.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

8. The Cabinet, at its meeting on 13 September 2024, gave approval to consult on the Council's first Customer Experience Strategy.
9. The Customer Experience Strategy aligns with all five outcomes of the Council's Strategic Plan (2022-26); Great Communities, Clean and Green, Safe and Well, Improved Opportunities and Strong economy and infrastructure. The Strategy also plays an enabling role in delivering the Customer Programme within the Council's Strategic Change Portfolio; recognised within the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024-2028.

Resource Implications

10. The Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024/25-2027/28 includes a requirement for savings via the Customer Programme of £640,000.
11. Officers from customer services, ICT and digital, learning and development, business intelligence, communications and individual service areas will deliver the Strategy, which will become a business as usual function. Temporary resource from within the Transformation Unit is in place, using spend to save money from Transformation Reserves; this resource is currently working with staff across the Council as part of the Customer Programme Team to ensure a sustainable approach is established, with clear actions and accountable owners.
12. The Council has a number of existing technical solutions it uses to handle customer contact, including Microsoft for email and telephony, as well as various online customer platforms and portals which support online form completions and some customer account activity. There are some functional gaps within the existing offerings and it is likely that the Council will need to increase its investment in its digital capabilities to deliver the necessary actions that will derive from the Customer Experience Strategy, such as improved communications using appropriate automation solutions, for example automated completion of information and improved search functionality on the website.
13. Where services require a considerable step change in the way they operate to align with the principles within the Strategy, for example those services with limited (if any) online offerings or lower than average customer service levels, investment may be required to support such improvement (both in terms of technical expertise and solutions). Where this is the case, service areas will be expected to outline the proposed opportunity and financial implications through developing business cases that set out clearly any return on investment. Robust governance that provides opportunity for assurance and challenge on any proposals made will be part of this process. A similar approach has been

taken so far, with financial savings relating to customer efficiencies achieved. A combination of existing service budgets and one off Transformation Reserve may be needed to secure the long term savings, although such detail requires further consideration within individual project activities.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

14. This report will be circulated to all members.

Officer(s) to Contact

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PART B

Background

National and Local Context

15. National and local public services continue to score worst in terms of customer satisfaction, despite the digital advancements redefining customer expectations post Covid-19.
16. Pressure on the County Council continues to grow; the Medium Term Financial Strategy funding gap will grow to over £80m by 2027/28, the population in Leicestershire has risen by almost 10% since 2011 and in 2023/24 the level of complaints the Council received increased by 5% on the previous year.
17. Through the Council's Customer Programme, multiple projects have trialled new approaches. The Blue Badge, School Admissions and Adult Social Care front door projects are all starting to see results, with other service areas such as Environment and Transport and Children's Social Care also commencing trials. Principles that have underpinned the approaches used are now set out in the new Customer Experience Strategy. Through customer insight, process and technology change, projects have supported improved customer experience whilst also saving the Council money. For example:
 - within adult social care services, the improvements made have seen the overall average call queuing time reduce from just over 19 minutes on average to under 9 minutes since February this year;
 - complaints in school admissions have reduced significantly with the proportion of customers needing to contact the Council post-application reducing by approximately 50% during the 2023/24 academic year compared to the previous year;
 - the average end-to-end processing time of a blue badge application has reduced from 7.9 days to 3 days over the past 12 months. This timeframe is expected to reduce further as a result of a new and improved case management system due to go live in December.
18. Further work is required to achieve a consistent level of customer service across all the Council's services but it is hoped that the new Strategy will enable this.
19. The Scrutiny Commission received a report in March 2024 on the Council's Customer and Automation programme activity, which set out the Council's programme vision and approach. At that time, the programme team received feedback from the Commission in terms of how it was engaging Elected Members and the community on its overall approach. This Strategy incorporates that feedback in a consistent framework for any customer service related changes across the authority, whilst also providing transparency with customers about the Council's customer experience commitment.

Proposal – A new Customer Experience Strategy

20. The Council's vision for Customer Experience is that "people will be able to communicate with our services, quicker and easier through modern and accessible means."
21. Modern Customer Experience strategies are more than just the digital channel; they focus on the total experience simultaneously, addressing the employee workflow and the customer experience. In practice this improves the efficiency of the underlying delivery processes and reduces the channel friction points that cause frustration for customers. It also provides the foundations for consistency between the multiple channels provided, enabling improved customer journeys, whether customers engage digitally or through other means.
22. The Strategy is based around the following key principles:
- i. **Customer focused:** building a culture that is aligned with good customer experience
 - ii. **Accessible and inclusive:** designing services accessible to those who need them, with clear and comprehensible content
 - iii. **Transparency:** in the Council's decision making and communication
 - iv. **Efficiency and effectiveness:** in maximising value, addressing barriers to deliver good quality services
 - v. **Continuous improvement:** in learning and improving
 - vi. **Sustainable design:** in considering the environmental, social, and economic impact of the Council's customer service.
23. These principles are expanded on within the full Strategy, which is attached as an appendix to this report. The Council will monitor its effectiveness via customer feedback and data monitoring.
24. A key mechanism for delivering the Strategy will be through staged implementation plans that will move the Council towards a new customer service operating model; this is a detailed description of what customer service will look like across the Council at the end of the Customer Programme, including what the future structure to support good customer experience is, the Council's working practices and processes, as well as the information, data and technology it requires to support effective and efficient customer service. This customer service operating model will be continuously developed from the lessons learned in delivered projects, and there will be intermediate models throughout the life of the programme to get to the full realisation of the vision and strategy. It provides a framework of best practice approaches to enable an evidential understanding of the customer and service areas which can then be used to improve the service offering. This blueprint will include:
- a) continuous improvement actions;

- b) investing in technology, to ensure that growing services can provide a sustainable offer;
- c) spending less money in the long term, through reducing the volume of contact that requires a real time human conversation;
- d) the way some customers will access services will change;
- e) embedding a customer centric mindset in the workplace;
- f) using customer insight data to improve customer service;
- g) ensuring Elected Members can play their part in helping customers, and supporting them to do so.

25. The Strategy will apply to all front facing services, and not just those that sit within the Customer Service Centre. Support and focus will be on those areas with high numbers of customers, for example (but not limited to):

- Children's Early Help and Social Care
- Registration Services
- Traded Services
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

The above is in addition to areas linked to the Customer Service Centre such as Adult Social Care, Highways, Transport, Waste, Blue Badge, Concessionary Travel and School Admissions.

26. The Strategy proposes a repeatable approach to the review of customer service processes and practices within individual service areas. This framework will ensure:

- a. the Council prioritises improvement in areas that need it most;
- b. All staff recognise the approach, speeding up reviews and ensuring there is consistency in what is considered during any change;
- c. Any proposed change is evidence led and reflects the needs of those customers that the service is targeted at; ensuring that before change is introduced, the profile of customers accessing a service is properly understood, including who they are and what they are contacting the Council about, so that contact channels remain accessible for all.

27. Such controls help provide the assurance that change is well thought through, based on evidence, trialled and measured to understand what impact these will have on the Council's customers, and that the approach is kept under review so that this can be refined when and where required. It will also ensure that the right channel is offered at the right time, prioritising certain channels for customers with disabilities or vulnerabilities such as visual, hearing, speech impairment, learning disabilities or neurological limitations so they are still able to access Council services.

28. As a result of the Strategy, the key changes expected to be seen include:

- a. A reduction in customer complaints related to insufficient information and communication with services;
- b. Improved telephony performance including reduced call wait times and fewer missed calls;
- c. Access to information and support outside of working hours through improved online offering (for those digitally abled);
- d. The removal of unnecessary steps in the customer journey and back office process, improving response times and reducing human effort involved;
- e. A reduction in failure demand (customer demand caused by a failure to do something or do something right for the customer, for example, where a person is having to repeatedly chase for updates on a previous contact);
- f. Financial savings and cost avoidance associated with reduced contact demand where there is failure demand, and reduced processing effort, leading to the requirement for fewer staff;
- g. Channel shift; increasing the online take up rate which in turn frees up phone lines for those unable to go online due to their disability or vulnerability, or where they do not have access to technology and internet that would enable them to do so;
- h. Increased customer demand in commercial service areas leading to more income.

Consultation

29. Informal Customer engagement took place during July and August 2024 (full details are included in Appendix C, attached to this report); 316 responses were received and the outcome of this engagement informed the initial draft strategy.
30. Public consultation on the Strategy took place between 14 September and 10 November 2024. This sought the views of the County Council's customers, as well as staff. The term "customer" refers to any individual or organisation who engages with Council services in Leicestershire, including residents, family and friends of residents, visitors, and a breadth of organisations, from public and voluntary sector organisations such as district and parish councils through to commercial businesses requiring Council services. The full consultation report setting out both the activity undertaken as well as the findings is attached as Appendix B and a summary is given below.
31. Following closure of the formal consultation, 154 survey responses had been submitted.
32. A total of 60% of respondents were Leicestershire residents (with responses received from all parts of the county), 19% a family/friend of a Leicestershire resident, 17% a County Council employee, 2% parish or district council, and 2% other. Most respondents had been in contact with the Council in the last six months (68%) and a further 12% within the last twelve months.

33. Table 1 below presents the support for the vision “People will be able to communicate with us, quicker and easier through modern and accessible ways”:

Table 1: Consultation results relating to the level of support there was for the Vision

Respondent type		Base (number of respondents who chose to answer this question)	Support for the vision (or neither agreed nor disagreed)	Support for the strategy as a whole
All respondents	n/a	152	76%	76%
Age	Over 65 years	46	76%	86%
	Under 65 years	106	85%	84%
Disability	Disability or long standing illness	45	71%	74%
	No disability	93	82%	91%
Internal/External	Internal/employer	26	89%	96%
	External	126	74%	82%

34. Support for the underlying principles within the Strategy were broadly positive, with those disagreeing with the principles in the minority. There were limited trends in terms of those respondents of a specific demographic.

Table 2: the level of support from respondents in relation to each Principle

Principle	% in support or neither agreed nor disagreed				
	All	Age		Disability	
		Over 65	Under 65	Yes	No
1. Customer focussed	85%	88%	83%	88%	89%
2. Accessible and inclusive	83%	85%	81%	82%	86%
3. Transparency	83%	83%	82%	76%	87%
4. Efficiency and Effectiveness	86%	89%	85%	82%	93%
5. Continuous improvement	79%	80%	80%	76%	82%
6. Sustainable design	84%	85%	83%	82%	87%

35. A range of comments were provided by respondents; key trends from this feedback have been assessed and are included in Appendix B of this report.

Comments of the Scrutiny Commission

36. The Scrutiny Commission considered a report at its meeting on 6 November 2024. Overall, the Commission welcomed the new Strategy but commented that despite the drive towards digital options, a personalised approach to its customers would always be important across all contact channels. The following points were made:
- i. Residents sometimes suggested it was more difficult to get through to the CSC on Mondays and Fridays and the Director confirmed that these were the two busiest days when most calls were received which did affect response times.
 - ii. Whilst call response times had been included within the report, email response times had not. It was suggested that including such information might be helpful given that some calls might be received to follow up on emails not responded to within these timescales. Developing performance metrics across each channel will form part of the strategy implementation plan.
 - iii. It was noted that the Council had multiple access points across each service area and that different service areas operated different customer service systems, not all of which included an email option. For example, residents mostly contacted Adult Social Care via telephone or through the use of online forms. This and the current systems limited capability to track across the different contact channels limited the Services ability to monitor multiple contacts received from individual customers. The new Strategy aims to introduce greater consistency across the different customer service systems which members welcomed.
 - iv. Members raised concerns that residents often commented that the Council's website was confusing and difficult to navigate and suggested that this might hinder delivery of the Strategy. The Commission agreed that if residents could not make good use of the website, they would be more likely to telephone the CSC which would be counterproductive to delivery of the Strategy. Members were reassured that work was taking place with the Communications team to improve the website and that this formed part of the Council's overall plan to improve the customer experience.
 - v. A member questioned whether the County Council had undertaken research into the potential benefits of a joint web presence involving other partner organisations. It was acknowledged that many residents did not appreciate the distinction, for example, between the County and district councils, or the NHS and Adult Social Care services.
 - vi. A Member challenged why the Council had not pursued the use of mobile applications in the same way as some other authorities, particularly for matters such as reporting potholes that required fixing. It was noted that the Council had looked at the use of 'Apps' but that the benefits had not been shown to warrant the high level of cost involved in developing this. As technology improved, however, this would be kept under review.

- vii. Members were keen to see more use of SMS text messaging as a proven way to keep people updated and reduce unnecessary contact. It was suggested that increased use of WhatsApp should also be considered and encouraged.
- viii. A reduction in complaints was one area against which the success of the Strategy could be measured. Activity to split out complaints reasons so that those relating to customer service could be reported on as part of strategy monitoring and implementation.
- ix. Members welcomed the use of SMS text messaging as part of the consultation which had generated a higher response rate compared to other consultation routes. It was suggested that this might be an area used more frequently in other consultations undertaken by the Council.
- x. The overall number of consultation responses was not very high when compared to the number of contacts received each day by the CSC. It was questioned whether the responses could therefore be treated as truly representative of people's experiences when contacting the Council and a Member argued that some degree of caution might be needed when relying on this data.
- xi. The need to ensure online channels were clear and concise, and did not use complicated language or acronyms was important. This has been emphasised in the strategy.

Amendments made to the Strategy

37. Following a review of consultation feedback, some amendments have been made to the Strategy, as follows:
- i. National context – acknowledges neurodiversity, those hard of hearing and those with sight loss, referring to the need to design for inclusivity.
 - ii. Streamlined principle descriptions to avoid repetition
 - iii. Principle 1. Customer Focussed – additional bullet to reference the need for “consistent customer service skills and behaviours applied across all services”
 - iv. Principle 2. Accessible and inclusive – additional bullet to reference “Information we provide or ask for is accessible to all i.e. clear and concise, jargon free”
 - v. How we know we have got it right? Section:
 - a. additional measure, customers will tell us that information provided is clear to understand
 - b. additional sentence added to reflect that an overarching annual customer experience action plan will be developed, implemented and reported on to the public.
 - vi. What this strategy means in practice, under “we will spend less money in the long term”, the following has been added:
 - a. Additional bullet: We will reduce the manual steps needed to process customer actions, reducing the time and effort required from our staff, and

- b. Supporting statement below the bullets: Both of the above will result in the need for less staff, and avoid growth in services leading to future cost avoidance.

Implementation of the New Customer Experience Strategy

- 38. The Customer Programme will take the initial lead on building priority actions into its wider programme of activity, to ensure all activity is underpinned by the vision and principles set out in the Strategy.
- 39. A clear set of actions for delivery over the next 12 months (as part of an annual implementation plan) will be created and monitored by the Customer Programme, to ensure actions are aligned and have organisation wide visibility and accountability. This action plan will be developed in conjunction with the Council's Senior Management Team and Departmental Management Teams. The Scrutiny Commission will be kept informed of the development and associated progress against the plan.
- 40. The Strategy forms the foundations for the wider Target Operating Model for Customer Contact across the Council; a next step will be to design the practical elements of the new model, using the Programme as a mechanism for putting this in place.
- 41. The Strategy will be made publicly available to customers, and engagement activity to bring the essence of the Strategy into the day to day operations of Council officers and management will take place.
- 42. The Strategy is ambitious and will therefore live well beyond the life of the Customer Programme, providing a key vehicle for embedding consistent customer service practices across Council services.

Equality Implications

- 43. The Customer Experience Strategy will have a positive impact on equality, diversity, and inclusion for people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 and more widely. This is because the plan will take a data driven approach to understand the needs of the Council's customers better and equip employees with relevant training. The plan also sets out to better understand the various channels different groups need to access services and where the Council can automate in some areas to spend more time on complex matters that require face to face or phone calls, so no one is digitally excluded.
- 44. An Equality Impact Assessment of the strategy and consultation approach has been undertaken. The strategy should enhance equality for all protected groups and other communities which are of special interest to the Council. The EIA has been revised following the consultation and is attached as Appendix D.

Human Rights Implications

- 45. There are no human rights implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Risk Assessment

46. A detailed risk assessment has been undertaken as part of the review of homeless support project and a risk log is being monitored by the Project Group which reports into the Public Health Departmental Management Team.

Health Implications

47. It is intended that the proposed model will enable individuals to access a broader range of health and wellbeing services, therefore providing a more holistic support offer for individuals.

Background Papers

Report to the Cabinet 13 September 2024 – Customer Experience Strategy 2024-2028 – Proposed Consultation

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/documents/s185074/cabinet-report-%20customer%20strategy%20130924%20MASTER.pdf>

Report to the Scrutiny Commission 6 November 2024 – Leicestershire County Council's Customer Experience Strategy Consultation

https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/documents/s186226/scrutiny%20Nov%2024_Custom er%20Strategy%20final.pdf

Appendices

Appendix A – Customer Experience Strategy

Appendix B – Summary Report of informal engagement to develop the strategy

Appendix C - Summary Report of Public Consultation

Appendix D – Equality Impact Assessment