



## CABINET

**Subject Heading:**

**Cabinet approval of the new Customer Service Strategy**

**Cabinet Member:**

Cllr Paul Middleton, Cabinet Member for Digital Transformation, IT and Customer Services

**ELT Lead:**

Kathy Freeman, Strategic Director, Resources

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**Policy context:**

Enabling a resident-focused and resilient Council

**Financial summary:**

Costs for implementing the Strategy to be absorbed by relevant teams. Any new capital investment will be subject to usual business case approval process.

**Is this a Key Decision?**

This is a Key Decision because it has a significant effect for all residents living in the Borough.

**When should this matter be reviewed?**

After first year of implementation and then annually until completion in FY26/27

**Reviewing OSC:**

People OSC

**The subject matter of this report deals with the following Council Objectives**

People - Supporting our residents to stay safe and well

Place - A great place to live, work and enjoy

Resources - Enabling a resident-focused and resilient Council X

**SUMMARY**

1. The Council is committed to delivering excellent customer service, raising customer satisfaction levels and meeting the needs of its resident, service users and other customers of our services. This ambition is reflected in the Corporate Plan for 24/25 which states:
2. *“We will provide excellent customer service and engage effectively with our communities”*. This new strategy sets out the actions the Council will take over the next three years to improve satisfaction rates for customers, clients and service users. It will be led by the Customer Service Directorate in the Resources Strategic Directorate and the strategy’s scope covers all teams delivering front-line services to residents of the Borough.
3. Importantly, the new strategy proposes a new set of customer service standards that residents can expect from us when they interact with us, regardless of service. It embodies a One Council approach to the delivery of quality services, within the confines of our financial context. These standards will improve our consistency of service and reduce the variation in response times residents currently experience from us.
4. Our vision is to be an award-winning organisation for customer service. We are one of the most efficient and productive councils in the country and we want to match that reputation by also being known for the quality of our service delivery. We aspire to deliver excellent customer service in every interaction we have with our residents, businesses and other stakeholders. We want our customers to be satisfied with the services they receive from us. By customers, we mean our residents, service users and people from businesses who access our services.
5. To achieve the ambitious vision, the strategy outlines three interrelated missions, and these are:
  - a. Embedding a customer-centric culture across the organisation;
  - b. Modernising service delivery; and
  - c. Improving the customer experience.
6. By achieving these missions, and implementing the associated programme of work effectively, we expect to improve the customer’s experience of our services. This will be captured by an expected increase customer satisfaction rates. When the strategy is fully implemented, we expect the following benefits:
  - Improved customer service levels to residents, indicated by improved customer satisfaction;
  - Happier, more productive and engaged staff;

- Reduced failure demand across the council - which is costly and time consuming to administer - caused by double or triple contact to us which is avoidable had we got it right first time;
  - Help make the organisation an attractive place to work, helping us become an employer of choice for new recruits;
  - Improve trust and confidence in what the Council delivers for local taxpayers and service users; and
  - Raise the profile of our organisation so that we become known as the best local authority for providing excellent customer service.
7. Our overall measure of success will be the increase in customer satisfaction rates we expect to see over the lifetime of the strategy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

8. Cabinet is asked to:
- Approve the contents of the draft Customer Service Strategy for the Council – see Appendix A;
  - Approve the new Customer Service Standards – see Appendix B;
  - Agree that the strategy be published in September 2024; and
  - Delegate authority to the Director of Customer Services to take forward the activities set out in the Roadmap – see Appendix C.

## REPORT DETAIL

### **Purpose**

9. The new Customer Service Strategy sets out what we are going to do to become recognised for delivering excellent customer service in everything we do by 2026/27. We want the Council to be an organisation where:
- We meet our customers' needs;
  - Our customers and service users are always treated politely, professionally and with understanding;
  - Our people have the skills and modern tools to provide excellent customer service;
  - We foster a culture of curiosity, learning and openness to acting on feedback from our customers and service users;
  - We strive to continually improve the quality of customer experience for all our services; and
  - We are open and transparent about our performance.

10. This Customer Service Strategy builds on the modernisation ambitions set out in the Havering Way, Transformation work programme and our Digital Strategy and underpins delivery of the priorities set out in the Council's Corporate Plan.
11. Providing excellent customer service to residents, businesses and stakeholders is central to the council's modernisation and transformation agenda. Getting this right will help us both reduce our costs, through reducing failure demand (e.g. chase up calls from customers) whilst also improving the customer experience for our residents.
12. Building on existing good practice, we want to bring the voice of our customers into the centre of how we design our services in the future, ensuring more consistency, ease of access and timeliness in how we deliver our services. The work to improve the quality of all our services continues beyond the life of this strategy. It will help us shape our organisational culture in line with our ICARE values and Choose Havering principles and behaviours.

## **Background**

13. Over the last few years, we have seen rising demand for our services, especially for adult and children's social care, along with higher demand for temporary housing accommodation, factors which place significant strain on the council's finances.
14. Like residents' budgets, the increases in the cost of living continue to impact the Council financially and our income falls short of the total cost of running all our services. The means we must spend our money even more wisely and ensure every penny counts.
15. Most of all, we recognise that our residents, businesses and stakeholders expect more from us than ever before. With limited resources, it is hard to meet everyone's expectations of the council which is why we also understand it is now more important than ever to make sure we get things right first time, every time and make every interaction count.
16. For these reasons, our refreshed Customer Services Strategy clarifies our ambitions for customer service over the next three years and explains what residents and businesses can expect from us in such a difficult financial context. The strategy is attached at Appendix A.
17. It also sets out at a high level how we will deliver our customer experience improvement agenda with limited resources - led by the Customer Services Directorate spearheading a 'One Council' approach - between now and 2026/27.

18. Over time, the actions set out in this strategy will drive up the quality of our services as experienced by customers and service users, and we expect to see increases in customer satisfaction rates. Our customers' satisfaction, along with improved business outcomes, will be our ultimate measures of success.

## **Our missions**

19. To achieve our ambitious vision, we have set ourselves three supporting missions:

- To embed a customer-centric culture across the whole Council;
- To modernise how we deliver our services; and
- To provide an improved customer experience to all Council services, information and advice.

20. We will ensure that modern, customer-focused services, enabled by digital technology - where possible - are at the core of everything we do as a Council. It will become part of our DNA and "*how we do things*" at Havering. We will make the most of the latest IT and digital developments, embedding them in how we deliver modern services to all our customers, ensuring support to those who are unable to use digital channels.

## **Embed a customer-centric culture**

21. Our first mission is to embed a customer-centric culture across the whole Council, ensuring that customer satisfaction is at the heart of all our operations, interactions, and decision-making processes. We need to become much better at thinking about service delivery from the perspective of our customers, rather than the service delivering them.

22. We also want all our people to think about how they best serve their 'customer' whether that is a resident, service user or indeed internal stakeholder, so that we are much more responsive to meeting the needs of our end users whoever they may be. This is what we mean when we refer to a 'customer centric council' – putting the needs of customers ahead of any other consideration when we design, deliver or operate our services.

23. A service should not require an understanding of how local government works for it to be accessed; we want all our services to be simple and easy to use, so that the resident or service user gets the support or assistance they need for a particular issue.

24. The strategy sets out in more detail the activities we intend to take for this mission including for example:

- Joining the Institute of Customer Service (ICS) in February 2024 to help support our journey to becoming a customer centric organisation;
- Publish and promote the commitments we have made in our new Customer Service Strategy for our organisation;
- Publish and promote the commitments we have made in our new Customer Service Strategy for our organisation;
- Establish a panel of residents and representatives from business with whom we can work to design, test and learn when developing new products or services, putting the voice of our users central to all our change delivery activity; and
- Put in place with services mechanisms for receiving regular customer feedback, specifically using existing tools (like CitizenSpace) for measuring our customers' satisfaction with the quality of all our front facing services and using feedback to understand how best we can improve the service.

### **Modernising service delivery**

25. Our customers should be able to access our services when they are needed, at a time appropriate to them, rather than when it suits the council. Too many of our services are only available during office working hours, making it difficult for some people to access those services. We also tend to rely on telephony as the primary mode of communication for residents, as well as issuing formal letters from the council, which are both costly channels to maintain.

26. We can use and deploy the latest developments in digital, data and other technologies (including artificial intelligence) that will help us better serve our customers and better meet their needs. When we provide a service online it is available 24 hours 7 days a week and when designed well can help resident interact with us simply and easily, allowing them to get on with their lives. We will also ensure phone and face to face support is also available for those that need it through our customer contact centre and at the Appointment Centre at the Town Hall. Service transactions can also be supported at our libraries across the Borough.

27. We also want to invest in our people so that they have the skills and confidence to know what 'excellent customer service' looks like and how it can be delivered. This will take time and investment, but it has the added benefit that it will also contribute to developing our workforce with the skills we all need for the future.

28. The strategy sets out in more detail the activities we intend to take for this mission including for example:

- Ensure every service is accessible to all customers via relevant channels including with text, chat, as well as online;
- Rollout CaseTracker as a solution for all complaints and for member enquiries, allowing us to track our performance against internal SLAs;
- Develop a hybrid contact centre model, and support Town Hall reception with face-to-face service;
- Deploy automated call handling and virtual agents for simple transactions; and
- Invest in a modern corporate telephony platform so that we can track and monitor phone calls and provide feedback to staff when things go wrong.

### **Improving the customer experience and access to information**

29. Too much of our current information is hard to find on our website or is written in a very technical, jargon-filled way that is not easy for customers to understand or use. We have recently refreshed our corporate website with a new look and feel, making it easier to navigate for users. We also need to continue removing old and out of date content which is not helpful to users of our website. We want our customers to be able to find the right information on our website easily and quickly, and contact us only when they really need to do so.

30. We need to move away from internal speak in all our customer facing material and spend more time publishing content from a customer's perspective. We also need to have one tone of voice when interacting with customers and drive up the quality of our written communications to customers.

31. The strategy sets out in more detail the activities we intend to take for this mission including for example:

- Refresh our corporate website, moving to a new, modern template for the council, acting as a "single front door" for our core services;
- Provide advice and guidance to colleagues about how to write customer friendly letters and content for the website;
- Produce regular lessons learned and insight from our Complaints team, and put in place improvements for customers based on the feedback;
- Professionalise our customer service roles, with a clear career pathway and recognise their skills as a dedicated profession within the Council; and



- Encourage more services to test their services with end users on a regular basis, ensuring anything that is customer facing has been through some form of user testing to check for accessibility, ease of understanding and simplicity.

### **Benefits of the Customer Service Strategy**

32. The new strategy will take three years to deliver. We recognise it will need to be deployed against a backdrop of an ever tighter financial situation for the council and where we must make every penny count.
33. However, we believe getting customer service right first time, every time will bring significant benefits to both our residents and staff delivering services across the Borough. Our key performance indicators (KPIs) set out in the Corporate Plan will also measure how we are performing against the missions set out in this strategy.
34. We will regularly review our planned activities and publish our progress in delivering this strategy, learning from experience about what works, and adjusting our plans if our context changes. We remain committed, however, to providing excellent customer service levels to all our residents, businesses and stakeholders for the lifetime of this strategy and beyond.

## **REASONS AND OPTIONS**

### **Reasons for the decision:**

35. Following an LGA (Local Government Association) Peer Review in 2023, Cabinet identified one of its three strategic priorities was to improve customer service levels across the organisation, alongside improving digital services and our engagement with residents. To address the customer service priority, in July 2023 the Chief Executive sponsored the implementation of a new Target Operating Model (TOM) for the council. Amongst other changes, the new officer structure created a new Director of Customer Services which brought together under one Directorate several customer-facing teams, including our customer contact centre, appointment centre, library service, bereavement and registration services, and the creation of a new centralised business support and complaints handling team.
36. The Director of Customer Services, appointed in September 2023, working with the Leader of the Council, identified the need for a new strategy for the council setting out how the administration could achieve its ambition for customer services, including a clear roadmap of activity for the next three years. The new strategy addresses this need. Separately, the council had not at that point



published a Customer Charter setting out what service levels residents could expect when interacting with the organisation.

37. Again, the strategy addresses this gap by proposing a new set of customer service standards informed by best practice across local government, taking account of our current financial context. The new customer service standards are a crucial element of Mission One about embedding a customer centric culture across the council, building on the decent work already taking place in some services, but not consistently applied by all teams. The adoption of the new standards will go some way to addressing this variation in service delivery standards.

**Other options considered:**

38. One option was to retain the status quo and proceed without any strategic direction, vision or purpose for customer services. This was rejected as it would not meet the needs of the administration and its priority to improve customer service levels to residents, service users and other stakeholders. So, the 'Do Nothing' option was not a viable option.

39. Officers also considered a more expensive and longer-term strategy set over the next ten years that would have required significant additional and new investment over the medium term to realise the aspirations. This was also rejected as a viable option because of our current constrained financial position; the current (proposed) strategy balances the need for action to make progress in this area with our limited resources.

40. Primarily the work will be sponsored and led by our Customer Services Directorate, co-ordinating the relevant activity across the council, whilst working with other partners (for example, ICT and HR colleagues) to deliver key changes over the short term. The strategy therefore does not commit the council to significant sums of additional investment now. As the strategy is deployed over the next three years, where capital is required, a business case will be developed to secure the required funding. Cabinet will need to note that some activities are contingent on the successful approval of individual business cases.

**IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS**

**Financial implications and risks:**

41. There is no provision in the current budget or medium-term finance plan for any financial implications arising from subsequent proposals associated with implementing the Customer Service strategy.
42. Whilst there are no explicit financial implications as a direct result of the Strategy, it is reasonable to expect that there may flow from same further implementation which may require further investment. This will wherever possible be financed from within existing revenue budgets or, where funding is required from capital investment will be subject to separate decision-making processes and approvals in line with financial procedure.

**Legal implications and risks:**

43. There are no immediate legal risks arising because of the proposed introduction of this strategy.

**Human Resources implications and risks:**

44. There appear to be no HR implications or risks arising directly because of the Strategy.
45. The Customer Service Strategy is consistent with the Council's Workforce Strategy, there are many synergies which focus on putting the residents first by embedding an inclusive culture, consideration for the use of technology/digital solutions and that services are designed and delivered from the perspective of our customers that they are at the heart of the outcome (to name a few).
46. HR colleagues are happy to be part of the journey and to partner with the team to embed the Customer Service Culture and Charter to ensure our workforce have the right skills to serve their customers both from an external and internal perspective and improve the quality of customer experience.

**Equalities implications and risks:**

47. This strategy identifies steps to build the Council's reputation and confidence through engagement with residents combined with staff learning to improve our residents' and customer experiences when they need our services most. The insights and intelligence gathered will support our strategy and customer service development.
48. The strategy recognises the need to ensure digital accessibility and how diverse protected characteristic (PC) groups may be impacted. This is summarised below:
- Age: our resident and customer community are multi-generational and multi-dimensional – some are very IT savvy – some are not, some are in digital poverty or digital illiteracy; the strategy recognises the need to ensure channels are available for those less able to access online services.

- Disability: there is still a lot of work to do to combat negative social perspectives and stereotypes around the wide range of diverse disabilities or long-term health conditions within our community. Some key essentials are around accessible information, Town Hall accessibility, reasonable adjustments, and specific measures to aid those with learning disabilities and mental health concerns. For those with a hearing impairment, we will continue to provide a text relay service for callers to our customer contact centre.
- Ethnicity and Socio-economic groups: multi-dimensional, diverse, cultural specificity, and generational differences. Newly arrived groups and their awareness of our local systems may not be that strong. Some may also experience digital poverty/illiteracy. We have access to shared services contract with the Language Shop – and last year we provided language services that included: BSL, Arabic, Bengali (several dialects), Turkish, Albanian, Amharic, Kurdish. This will be considered in any future service provisions changes e.g. deploying modern technology to ensure language translation is available online when interacting with our contact centre agents.
- Religion: culturally sensitive provision – avoiding stigma and stereotypes to diverse faith groups; the strategy has no impact here.
- Sexual Orientation: social, economic and health barriers - avoid stigma and bias; the strategy has no impact here.
- Gender-reassignment: in the 2021 census more than 1000 residents over the age of 16 said their gender was different to that registered at birth. Important to avoid stigma and bias in our service provision. The strategy also has no impact here.

### **Health and Wellbeing implications and Risks**

49. Whilst there are other ways for those digitally challenged to access services this provision needs to be adequate particularly for vulnerable residents such as those with learning disability. This is recognised in the strategy and services will continue to ensure they are accessible to all residents, especially those who are vulnerable.

50. There is an opportunity for all front facing staff to adopt make every contact count (MECC) approach to help to maximise health and wellbeing of residents and this should be considered as part of future developments in our contact centre operations.

<p><b>ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS</b></p>
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The new Customer Service Strategy has minimal implications and risks for the Council's ambition for the organisation and the Borough to be carbon neutral by 2024 or sooner.

Indirectly, it may have a positive impact if we can reduce failure demand and get things right first time, every time, thereby reducing unnecessary rework and activity within the organisation. This may contribute to less energy use and therefore overtime a reduction in our carbon emissions. However, this is difficult to measure and assess.

Overall, nothing in the strategy is contrary to the Council's stated climate change ambitions including preparing for the impact of climate change within the Borough.

### **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- A. Customer Service Strategy
- B. Customer Service Standards (Appendix 1 of Strategy document)
- C. Customer Service Strategy Roadmap (Appendix 2 of Strategy document)
- D. Equality Impact Assessment (Draft)