



## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD, 30 JULY 2024

**Subject Heading:**

Customer Service Strategy Update

**SLT Lead:**

Kathy Freeman, Strategic Director,  
Resources

**Report Author and contact details:**

Paul Fisher, Director of Customer  
Services

[paul.fisher@havering.gov.uk](mailto:paul.fisher@havering.gov.uk)

Tel: 01708 433 654

**Policy context:**

To provide the Committee with an update  
on the council's new Customer Service  
Strategy

### SUMMARY

1. The Council is committed to delivering excellent customer service for the Borough's residents, service users and customers and this is set out in the Corporate Plan for 24/25.
2. The new Customer Service Strategy sets out how the council will achieve this ambition over the next three years. The Strategy also sets out – for the first time – the customer service standards (including speed of response times) residents can expect when they interact with the council's employees.
3. The strategy also provides the proposed Roadmap of planned activities, organised under three missions, that will help the council become much more customer centric, whilst living within its limited financial resources, to drive up customer satisfaction levels.
4. Achieving excellent customer service will take time and effort from the whole organisation, and if we get this right, will reduce unnecessary rework, improve staff engagement and resident trust and confidence in the organisation.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

5. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to:
- Note for information the contents of the new Customer Service Strategy;
  - Invite to comment on the new customer service standards; and
  - Provide a view on how the Committee would like to be kept informed on progress delivering the new strategy, and specifically any role the Committee may wish to have regarding performance against these service standards.

**REPORT DETAIL**

**Introduction**

6. 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.
7. 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.
8. 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.

**Background**

9. 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

## Overview & Scrutiny Board, 30 July 2024

temporary housing accommodation, factors which place significant strain on the council's finances.

10. 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.
11. 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.
12. 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.
13. 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 - 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

## **Overview & Scrutiny Board, 30 July 2024**

at thinking about service delivery from the perspective of our customers, rather than the service delivering them. The new engagement strategy being developed by the communications team sets out how we will do this.

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 and/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 are taking as part of 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.

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. That is why we have refreshed our corporate website with a new, fresher look and feel, making it easier for users to navigate. We also need to remove 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 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

## **Overview & Scrutiny Board, 30 July 2024**

- 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.

### **IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS**

None for Overview and Scrutiny Committee

### **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Supporting papers:

1. Customer Service Strategy
2. Customse service standards (see Appendix 1)
3. Roadmap (see Appendix 2)