

## SOUTH HOLLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

**Report of:** Cllr Tracey Carter, Portfolio Holder for Governance and Customer  
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Officer)

**To:** Cabinet – 12 March 2019

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**Subject** Customer Access Strategy

**Purpose:** To implement the Customer Access Strategy which aims to improve  
residents' experience of contacting South Holland District Council while also  
increasing the efficiency of our overall operating arrangements

### **Recommendation:**

- 1) That the draft Customer Access Strategy be approved.
- 2) That the strategy be implemented from April 2019, to align with the Council's new Corporate Plan.
- 3) That the strategy's progress be reported to the Council's Performance Monitoring Panel on a six monthly basis, or as appropriate.

### 1.0 **BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 The draft Customer Access Strategy has been designed to support the wider aims of the South Holland Corporate Plan and its corporate priorities. In particular to 'provide the right services, at the right time and in the right way'. Specifically, it seeks to transform the way in which customers – residents, businesses and visitors – are able to access information, advice and services.
- 1.2 The strategy, therefore, provides an opportunity for the Council to not only improve customer experience of accessing services, but also to create efficiencies through the increased take-up of more cost-effective contact channels.
- 1.3 It also builds on the work already undertaken as part of the Council's Moving Forward Programme which has implemented a number of customer service improvements, including:
  - A new, **redesigned website**, which can be accessed on smart phones and tablets, as well as desktop computers. Residents with hearing or visual impairments can view the

website content in extra-large font/text to assist people with visual impairments, and sound/audio buttons are designed to benefit those with hearing impairments.

- Digital assistance for customers needing **help to access Council services online** through the Council's Priory Road office.
- Online **book and pay technology**, to provide customers with easier and more convenient ways to book and pay for Council services, while saving officer processing time.
- **'My Account'** online search feature, enabling customers to search by postcode for more relevant and personalised, map-based information about Council services. Eg: Bin collection days
- **Online forms**, enabling customers to communicate easily and efficiently with services, reducing response times and processing costs.
- **Co-location with DWP** (Department for Work and Pensions) at the Council's Priory Road office, to provide a more joined-up service for shared customers.

- 1.4 At the same time, the Council recognises that not all customers have the digital skills or technology necessary to access its services online, and that it is important to make sure that no-one is disadvantaged by its plans to digitalise its services.

So while encouraging people, wherever possible and practical, to access services online, all customers will continue to be able to get the help and support they need in a variety of different ways, including face-to-face and telephone contact.

- 1.5 Consultation on the Strategy has taken place with both CPBS and East Lindsey District Council, as a shared client of CPBS with particular regard to the proposed Customer Charter service standards (in section 4.2 of the report)

- 1.6 The Strategy has been presented to members through Portfolio Holder briefings, Strategy Board and at several member engagement sessions after which FAQs were created and circulated to all members. It has also been to the Joint Performance Monitoring and Policy Development Panel twice for comment, feedback from which has been incorporated into the draft strategy and customer charter presented in this report. Following these member engagement sessions, feedback from the February meeting of the Joint Performance Monitoring and Policy Development Panel was to recommend the strategy to Cabinet, requesting that its progress be reported to the Performance Monitoring Panel on a six monthly basis, or as appropriate.

## 2.0 STRATEGY

- 2.1 The strategy seeks to create modern and relevant access arrangements which are tailored to meet the changing needs of all Council customers, while responding positively to the financial pressures faced by the authority and to target our most personalised contact arrangements (i.e. telephone and face-to-face) at those who are most vulnerable or have more complex enquiries.

### 2.2 Strategy ambitions

Underpinning the strategy is a set of high level ambitions which will help shape the way we manage our current customer contact handling arrangements:

- To always provide the best possible customer experience
- To provide services that are built around customers' needs
- To provide online services so good people choose to use them
- To focus on those that need support – the digitally excluded
- To continually look to improve what we do through customer feedback
- To maintain all existing contact channels

The strategy proposes to set a goal to increase the number of web-based interactions from their current level of 3.1% of total customer interactions to 50% of total customer interactions by 2022.

### 3.3 **Strategy development**

The draft strategy has been developed in consultation with senior officers, and the portfolio holder for Governance and Customer. In addition, it has been shared direct with East Lindsey District Council for information and comment, as well as CPBS, as the Council's delivery partner for Customer Services. CPBS has confirmed it is supportive of the strategy's intent and that its current operating model is capable of meeting the strategy's requirements.

## 3.0 **CUSTOMER INSIGHT**

- 3.1 Some of the drivers of the strategy are changing customer habits, preferences and expectations. Increasingly, people are embracing new technologies and using them in their everyday lives. This can be seen in the way people now manage their finances, book a holiday or do their supermarket shopping online – all of which can be done at a time that suits them, quickly and conveniently, and which in the vast majority of cases delivers what they want.

The majority of residents access the internet on a regular basis, with 87% having been online in the last three months:

- Most have the necessary connectivity to access online services with 93% having access to broadband speeds of more than 10Mb per second.
- Many (75%) also have the basic digital skills needed to benefit from online services

- 3.2 The Council believes there is potential for more of its customers to self-serve, providing the online services it offers are easy-to-access and simple to understand. Recent experience, for example, has shown the Council that more than 80% of customers will self-serve online where the service is easy-to-use and simple to understand. (E.g. Garden waste online service).

- 3.3 As a result, the Council wants to encourage customers, wherever possible and practical, to access services and information direct from its website (i.e. self-serve) so that it can focus its more personalised contact arrangements on those that need our help the most.

- 3.4 The Council is particularly mindful, however, that while 75% of residents have the basic digital skills needed to access services online, a further 25% of residents who don't currently have these skills should not feel disadvantaged. These customers will still be able to contact the Council by more traditional means such as telephone but should be supported to either develop these new skills, if they wish to, or receive the help they need using other contact methods.

Further details of how the Council proposes to do this are set out in section 4.4 of this report.

#### 4.4 **Customer personas**

To help design online services that are relevant to – and meet the needs of – its customers, the Council has created a set of ‘customer personas’ which represent its key customer types. They are fictitious, but are based on trusted sources of national and local data to help create a picture of who the Council’s customers are (Eg: their lifestyles, the way they prefer to access information and services, and their digital skills).

In the draft strategy presented to the joint meeting of PMP and PDP in November 2018, Members requested that these were removed from the final Customer Access Strategy document before publication. This has since been actioned.

### 4.0 **STRATEGY FEATURES**

#### 4.1 **Channel Strategy**

The Council will prioritise online and automated services, wherever possible, focusing face-to-face support on those that need its help the most.

Phone calls will be answered promptly, but not in preference to other more efficient contact channels.

The Council will only promote one contact number. This will be backed up with in-depth training to help resolve the majority of issues at the first point of contact – only handing off calls to services for more complex issues.

#### 4.2 **Revised customer charter**

This sets out the Council’s commitment to customers and our expectations of them. It also creates a set of standards for how we will acknowledge and respond to enquiries and requests, in a way that supports our channel strategy.

For example, for service requests and enquiries, online is the quickest channel to access services; letters take the longest. For complaints and FOIs, lengthier timescales allow for more detailed responses and often, more than one service needing to contribute information.

#### 4.3 **Set of digital principles**

These align to government best practice standards and have been developed so that all council departments and their staff are signed up to working in a consistent way when reviewing or redesigning services.

#### 4.4 **Digital inclusion strategy**

This proposes how we will work with partners to improve the digital skills of our residents, as this will be critical to achieving the strategy’s vision. For example, face-to-face support available at the Council’s Priory Road office, where customers are being supported to develop their digital skills and awareness to access information and services online.

For those customers who feel unable or unwilling to increase their digital skills, access to all council services remains available by contacting the Council by telephone or by visiting in person. Efficiencies will still be achieved in these cases by the adoption of Assisted Service. This is where Customer Contact Centre staff use the same online methods to report issues as residents, with the information being fed into the same improved processes as those reporting issues directly online. Where the resident has an email address or phone that can receive text messages, they will still be fully updated on the progress of the reported issue.

## 5.0 **OPTIONS**

- 5.1 Approve the draft Customer Access Strategy, to be implemented from April 1 2019, as well as agree that the strategy's progress be reported to the Council's Performance Monitoring Panel on a six monthly basis, or as appropriate
- 5.2 Propose changes to the draft Customer Access Strategy, or its reporting to the Council's Performance Monitoring Panel every six months.
- 5.3 Do nothing.

## 6.0 **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION**

- 6.1 The strategy sets out a clear plan for making best use of Council resources to meet the needs of its customers, achieving value for money for the Council and its residents.

Not only does the strategy aim to improve services, it also anticipates a reduction in costs over the three-year period, through increased productivity, automation of service processes, and as more customers seek to access Council services online.

(More detail on this is provided in the draft Digital and ICT Strategy report within the agenda pack for this meeting.)

## 7.0 **EXPECTED BENEFITS**

- 7.1 By providing quicker and more efficient access to information, advice and services through digital channels, the Council will be able to provide an improved customer experience.
- 7.2 As more customers choose – and expect – to transact with the Council via its website, the Council anticipates being able to make significant savings to its customer service operations.
- 7.3 More personalised support for vulnerable customers, or those with complex enquiries, by offering appointments at a time that suits them.
- 7.4 Providing digital support to build customers' skills and confidence, enabling them to access online services.

## 9.0 **IMPLICATIONS**

In preparing this report, the report author has considered the likely implications of the decision - particularly in terms of Carbon Footprint / Environmental Issues; Constitutional & Legal; Contracts; Corporate Priorities; Crime & Disorder; Equality & Diversity/Human Rights; Financial; Health & Wellbeing; Reputation; Risk Management; Safeguarding; Staffing; Stakeholders/Consultation/Timescales; Transformation Programme; Other. Where the report author considers that there may be implications under one or more of these headings, these are identified below.

## 9.1 **Corporate Priorities**

The strategy supports the Council's Corporate Plan priority of 'providing the right service, in the right way at the right time' by providing easy access to information, advice and support through multiple access channels.

## 9.2 **Equality and Diversity/Human Rights**

9.2.1 Residents, businesses and visitors will continue to be able to contact the Council by any of the following channels:

- Web
- Telephone
- Post or email
- Face-to-face
- Social media

In turn, the Council will contact those residents, businesses and visitors by web chat, telephone, post, email and social media.

### 9.2.2 Web:

South Holland District Council's website aims to conform to Level AA of the web content accessibility guidelines of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) which particularly considers protected groups, including people with disabilities.

The Council's website also features the option of a 'Recite Me' toolbar, which makes content more accessible with reading and translation support. Text can also be downloaded as an MP3 audio file.

Residents with hearing or visual impairments can view the website content in extra-large font/text to assist people with visual impairments, and sound/audio buttons are designed to benefit those with hearing impairments.

The carers (including family and friends) of older frail residents and of children and young people will benefit from transacting and finding out about services online. Many carers try to balance caring with work and careers and they will be able to access the Council 24/7.

### 9.2.3 Telephone:

While the strategy aims to encourage more residents to contact the Council online, it does not reduce or change residents' access to telephone contact channels to raise queries or access services. In fact, by the conclusion of this strategy in 2022 the Council expects that telephone will remain the prime source of customer contact. The strategy aims to improve the current service by reducing customer demand for this channel, and therefore will be of benefit to all groups who continue to use this as a way of contacting the Council.

### 9.2.4 Face-to-face:

Face-to-face services will be reconfigured to provide greater access to self-serve facilities and support to use these.

Face-to-face appointments will continue to be available for those who feel they need them (Eg: for more complex enquiries and more vulnerable customers) at the Council's Priory Road office.

### 9.3 **Financial**

The strategy also takes account of the increasing financial pressures faced by local Government and the need for all councils – including South Holland Council – to ensure they are delivering services as cost-effectively as possible.

The delivery of this strategy is closely linked to the ICT and Digital Strategy 2019-2022 and its associated Digital Work Programme, which also covers delivery costs.

### 9.4 **Staffing**

No staffing implications at this time.

### 9.5 **Constitution/Legal**

The Customer Access Strategy does not form part of the Council's policy framework, and is consistent with the Council's Corporate Plan. There are no direct financial or staffing implications at this stage. As such, this is an executive decision which falls to the Cabinet to determine.

## 10.0 **WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED**

10.1 All wards are affected by the strategy.

## 11.0 **ACRONYMS**

11.1 W3C – World Wide Web Consortium

11.2 DWP – Department for Work and Pensions

### **Lead Contact Officer**

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**Key Decision:** No

**Exempt Decision:** No

**This report refers to a Discretionary Service**

### **Appendices attached to this report:**

Appendix A Customer Access Strategy 2019-2022