

North Somerset Council

Report to the Executive

Date of Meeting: 27 April 2021

Subject of Report: Customer Service Strategy

Town or Parish: All

Member Presenting: Cllr Ashley Cartman, Executive Member for Corporate Services

Key Decision: Yes

Reason:

This strategy has the potential to impact the whole community of North Somerset.

Recommendations

That the Executive endorses the principles, aims and activities of the council's Customer Service Strategy for the period 2022 – 2027 and approves the adoption of the strategy.

1. Summary of Report

- 1.1. This report seeks the approval of the council's Customer Service Strategy for 2022 - 2027 by the Executive.
- 1.2. The report summarises the main developments in the strategy, it being our first Customer Service strategy to be approved by the Executive.
- 1.3. Given its significance, approval of the strategy by the Executive is sought before any implementation plan is initiated.
- 1.4. An appendix has been included which makes suggestions for immediate improving the face-to-face service that the council offers its customers

2. POLICY

- 2.1. The council's desire to provide good customer service whilst delivering its services means that the customer service strategy is directly associated with all the aims and priorities shown in the corporate plan.

3. DETAILS

- 3.1. The Customer Service Strategy will be effective for the period April 2022 - March 2027. It clearly establishes the council's position and expectations in relation to customer service provision within the council.
- 3.2. The Customer Service Strategy seeks to lay out the plans across the organisation and the areas upon which to focus. The strategy was created through many

engagement sessions with officers, members, community groups and through public consultation.

- 3.3. A copy of the Digital Strategy is included in the appendices due to the synergy between the two strategies.
- 3.4. The strategy is broken down into six focus areas which collectively define the strategic direction for customer service.
- 3.5. **Customer focused** is rethinking the way that we engage with our customers, putting them at the heart of our service design. It's about the way that we treat people, owning and understanding the customer journey and using our professional curiosity to support and assist, even when we have to say no.
- 3.6. **Connected** is about making it easy for our customers to contact us, and to ensure that they don't need to contact us unnecessarily. It's about being fair and consistent, and resolving issues at the point that they are received, wherever possible.
- 3.7. **Empowered** is about ensuring that we have a strong customer service culture within the council and that staff are well trained. It's about ensuring that when things go wrong, officers have the time, the empowerment and the tools to fix them.
- 3.8. **Service delivery** is about ensuring that our end-to-end processes are effective and customer-friendly, and that we are clear with our customers about what they should expect from us.
- 3.9. **Partnership** is about improving the customer experience by working with others and using our professional curiosity to understand our customers' needs better and make referrals where appropriate.
- 3.10. **Digital** is about using digital technologies to support all of the above. It's about making the best use of technologies to help us to deliver services more quickly and efficiently.
- 3.11. Our challenge in implementing the Customer Service Strategy is to make best use of limited financial resources to deliver maximum benefit to our residents, customers, members and officers. In the current climate, the council's main priority is to be able to maintain services whilst closing the medium-term funding gap, and customer service has a role to play in this respect in creating efficiencies.
- 3.12. The strategy is supported by an action plan which takes the desired outcomes and breaks them down into actions with associated dates applied.
- 3.13. The strategy is monitored through the council's annual business planning framework. It will be formally monitored and governed through Corporate Services Directorate Leadership Team and the ICT Architecture Board for any of the technical components.
- 3.14. The appendix proposes an immediate solution for improving the face-to-face service offered by the council. This forms part of the strategy and has been raised as a priority by both members and customers.

4. CONSULTATION

- 4.1.** The Customer Service Strategy has been developed in collaboration with strategic and operational managers across the council.
- 4.2.** The Customer Service Strategy has been shared and discussed with the Corporate Leadership Team and with the lead Executive Member.
- 4.3.** The Strategy was reviewed at the informal Partnerships, Corporate Organisation and Overview Management Policy and Scrutiny Informal Panel Meeting on two occasions, and with the ICT Scrutiny Steering Group.
- 4.4.** The strategy was discussed at the Equality Stakeholder Group and Disability Access Group. There was also engagement with the BSL users group and the Hard of Hearing Group.
- 4.5.** The strategy has been through public consultation on the corporate website. Town and Parish Councils were invited to participate as well as officers at North Somerset Council. The consultation ran for 6 weeks, and 40 responses were received via the portal and 2 via email. Wherever possible the feedback has been included in the final version of the Customer Service Strategy.

Issues raised:

- Not everyone will have access to digital
- How will we empower employees
- History of ignoring public opinion
- Little evidence that NSC acts on consultation results. Introduce rules on this.
- History of money wasted
- Want to have main council telephone number on the website, especially for Council Tax
- Need to have the right IT tools in place to deliver, not one size fits all, and enough staff
- Specific issue raised regarding internal system Confirm.
- MyAccount should be optional and have option to have more than one photo.
- More information about what we are doing about the digitally excluded and removing barriers to digital access.
- Fix broken links on the website
- Desire to go back to reception offer in the gateway to provide face to face support for all or at least have someone who can make appointments for people
- Strategy focuses on digital, and customer needs telephony offer
- Greater clarity around the face-to-face offer
- Want to be able to do more online
- Concern about computer access in the libraries being diminished with Word no longer being available.
- Explain how you intend to achieve the strategy or the measures. What are the priorities and where is the action plan.
- Nothing about working in partnership with health, parish councils, police
- Involve customers in your plans, focus on what customers wants not what NSC want to show.
- Vulnerable wouldn't have been able to access the online consultation

- Like the idea of customer champions who are good at communicating with customers
- Who takes ownership of reported issues and who get back to the customer
- Library service would like improve ICT provision to support customers
- Local surgery to support residents
- Concern by officers that customers dictate what we do and how we do it.
- Improve feedback for online reporting so that the customer is fully informed, e.g. if you close a report for something the customer assumes it has been done and may not have been.
- Improve website navigation – could not easily find consultation
- Prefer telephony over digital
- This point was liked - improve our data sharing practices making sure that you only need to tell us your information once wherever possible.
- “Provide local customer access for residents living in rural areas” flies in the face of your aim to improve digitisation.
- Your current digital process for reporting potholes is to be commended. Particularly like the clear definition of what varying potholes are, and the ease with which they can be located on a map and photographs uploaded
- What do we say is good customer service
- More emphasis on “gaps” in service
- Couldn’t find evidence of a charter
- It isn’t a strategy, it’s statement of aspirations
- Suggested condensed to single page

Responses to the issue raised will be published on the consultation site.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1.** There are no direct financial implications arising from the Customer Service Strategy itself which merely provides the overall framework in which customer service developments will be made in future years. Each of the projects that are delivered within the strategy framework will be subject to its own assessment of costs and benefits.
- 5.2.** The face-to-face proposal in the appendix will be a new service and will incur a cost. It is suggested that it is carried out as a six-month pilot initially to assess and understand customer need.

Costs

- 5.3. Recommendations to Executive Members from the PCOM Committee held on 17 March 2022.** At the informal PCOM meeting, the importance of this strategy was recognised and there was unanimous support that work on the ensuing action plan should be prioritised, particularly with regard to exploring options for face-to-face engagement across the district. Funding should be sourced from across the directorates as all services area will benefit from this strategy. PCOM members recommended that sufficient immediate resource be made available to take this customer service strategy forward as a priority, and that the Executive members acts as champion for delivery of this vital strategy.
- 5.4.** It will cost approximately £30,000 to implement the six-month face-to-face pilot.

Funding

- 5.5.** As the face-to-face pilot is a new proposal, the Corporate Services budget for 2022/23 will need to be increased, with one-off funding for £30,000 being allocated to the project from the Earmarked Reserve for Customer Services. If the pilot is evaluated to be a success, then it will need to be subject to a specific bid via the Medium Term Financial Planning process.

6. LEGAL POWERS AND IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1.** There are no legal powers or implications of the strategy. It is made up of individual activities and projects which sit in separation.

7. CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1.** Elements of the Customer Service Strategy cover climate change and environmental issues and these are noted within the strategy. The drive towards channel shift will have a positive impact on the environment through developments such as going paperless, moving towards automation, improved technologies which will lead to less telephony and face to face contact over time.
- 7.2.** Organisations like Ecobahn enable us to understand the impact of the channels that we use and therefore our future focus. For example, the carbon footprint of a letter on recycled paper and subsequently recycled is 140g, versus a standard email which is 4g, versus a text message which is 0.014g.
- 7.3.** Digital processes do carry a carbon footprint, but it is much lower than traditional ways of working. Putting digital first will allow us to remove waste and build more sustainable business processes whilst allowing us to be more productive and deliver a better customer experience.

8. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 8.1.** There are few risks arising from the adoption of the Customer Service Strategy itself given that the strategy sets out a high-level approach to development across the council. Detailed risk assessments will be undertaken for all the programmes and projects that arise from the Strategy.

9. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1.** Like all the authority's strategies, the Customer Service Strategy has been subjected to an equalities impact assessment. As the strategy sets out a broad direction of travel it is more appropriate for equality impact assessments to be undertaken for any significant individual implementation plans that arise directly as a result of the strategy.

10. CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1.** The Customer Service Strategy has the potential to affect every service team across the council.

11. OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 11.1.** The Customer Service Strategy has been created in conjunction with a large group of officers throughout the council. Options within the strategy have been discussed by the group and alternatives considered where appropriate. The final version has been agreed by the group as a collaborative effort.

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Appendices:

1. Maximising face-to-face proposal
2. Customer Service Five Year Strategy
3. Equality Impact Assessment

Background Papers:

1. Digital Strategy
2. Consultation responses

Appendix 1

Maximising face to face

Background

Pre pandemic, we offered customers a full face to face service at the Town Hall and a “light” service at Castlewood. Customers were able to walk into the Town Hall and see someone that day. Appointments were made for more complex queries.

We moved to an appointment only service as a result of a budget saving made in February 2021. This means that any request for a face-to-face meeting is triaged by the contact centres and dealt with over the phone where possible. The majority of the face-to-face appointments that we have seen are for blue badge applications, scanning of documents and Council Tax and benefits queries.

Face to face appointments are only available at the Town Hall in Weston-super-Mare. As a result of feedback from customers, members and through the Customer Service Strategy consultation process, there is a need to offer some opportunity for a face-to-face service in the north of the region to provide support for those who are digitally excluded. There is an action in the Digital Strategy to work on tackling digital exclusion and a group has been set up to do this. It also features within the Customer Service strategy and will form part of the action plan.

We do already provide some advice and guidance within the Library service.

Libraries Strategy 2021 – 31

“Digital, information and skills”

Libraries have a clear role to play in communities enabling residents without access to appropriate IT equipment and skills to explore and benefit from the increasingly digital world

The Library Strategy has an aim to: support residents to access digital services, including accessing government and local government services

“Community places, accessible to all

Libraries are vital hubs at the heart of the community where exciting things can happen. They bring people together and give them access to the services and support they need to help them live better

The Library Strategy has an aim to: provide a visible North Somerset Council presence in communities, as many services move online

Existing library offer (NB excluding Congresbury Community Library, which is run by volunteers and also limited service on Mobile Library):

- Free phone connection to Council Connect
- Signposting council/community information
- Support for basic/quick reporting and queries
- Support to get residents online (booking may be required)
- Space for NSC officers to meet resident /provide advice and guidance sessions
- Space for NSC information displays/ posters/ leaflets

Options

There are a number of ways that we could have a more regional presence. It is helpful to split customer demand into three tiers:

Tier 1 – simple queries or signposting which can be managed by the Library service or concierge

Tier 2 – more complex issues which are dealt with by the Council Connect team on the phone or face-to-face by appointment only

Tier 3 – these are specialist queries which are beyond the remit of the Council Connect team, for example complex Housing or Planning enquiries

Option 1. Promote the current Library service offer – tier 1

As mentioned above, the Library service already offers a “Council Connect” service.

Library locations can be found here: <https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/my-services/libraries-leisure-open-spaces/libraries/find-library/library-locations>

This type of service is available at the following Libraries:

- Campus
- Clevedon
- HLC
- Nailsea
- Pill Library and Children’s Centre
- Portishead
- Weston-super-Mare
- Winscombe
- Worle Library and Children’s Centre
- Yatton Library and Children’s Centre

The service should be promoted so that customers are aware that they can get support locally. We should advertise in Life magazine and update the website to reflect this.

Option 2. Mobile support through Council Connect team for more complex queries – tier 2

Provide additional support through the recruitment of two part-time mobile Council Connect advisors who will visit Library locations and use the mobile library to connect with customers from around the area. This would need to be timetabled, advertised in advance and clearly promoted. Consideration will need to be given as to how to manage any queues.

Two officers would be required to provide resilience in the service.

Locations where need is thought to be higher are Portishead, Clevedon, Nailsea, Yatton, Weston, HLC and Pill.

The officers would need to predominantly be trained in basic Council Tax and benefits queries, Blue Badge applications and scanning, and understand how to escalate issues which are outside of their knowledge or remit.

For the mobile library, the timetable can be found here: <https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-02/30917%20Mobile%20timetable%20insert%20Feb-Apr%202022.pdf>

The mobile locations where this would most likely work would be Wrington, Backwell, Long Ashton and Blagdon. These locations are ones which the mobile library service visits for long enough for queries to be dealt with. We do need to recognise that there is limited space on board the mobile library so this will need to be tested before rolling out.

Regular times and dates would need to be pre-arranged and these could be offered by the Council Connect team over the phone and advertised in Life magazine to reach the non-digital residents.

This could be run as a pilot for six months initially to test demand, with a review at three months.

NB. Document scanning and uploading within Libraries would require an ICT project to change settings on MFDs to enable staff scanning

We could also provide a more digital face-to-face offer by providing customer kiosks (like a zoom booth) in some of our larger Libraries staffed by the two additional officers to provide face-to-face support over the internet.

This could be achieved through having the technology to talk to people via video and have scanning equipment installed. Once installed, we could look at extending its use for other purposes such as job interviews, contacting other agencies, etc. This would support our work in tackling the digital exclusion.

There would need to be some basic digital support on site within the Library service should it be required.

The customer kiosk calls would need to be supported by officers within the Council Connect team and the Revenues and Benefits team.

4. Cost - estimates

The cost of two additional part-time FTEs (2 x 0.57 FTE) would be c. £40,000 per annum, so c. £20,000 over the six-month period. We may need additional funds to fit out with other equipment and cover travel expenses. Suggest £10,000 maximum.

The cost of implementing a customer kiosk system is likely to be in the region of £50,000 to £75,000 for the first unit. This would include hardware on the customer side, software on the council side, development, project management, integration and testing. The cost of subsequent kiosks would likely be significantly less. We would need to go out to procurement to establish accurate costs.

Proposal

- That we recruit 2 part-time Council Connect officers on a six-month basis to roll out face-to-face regional support for our customers
- Due to the cost of the customer booth, we defer any decision to implement before trialling the face-to-face option, and assess impact and satisfaction gained from this approach.

Potential timetable for face-to-face regional support – to be agreed

Day	Location	Details
Monday 11-1	Nailsea Library	10 mins drive to Backwell
Monday 2.15-4.15	Backwell mobile Library	2.15-4.15
Tuesday 11-1	Clevedon Library	15 mins drive to Portishead
Tuesday 2-4	Portishead Library	
Wednesday 10-1	Weston Library	5 mins drive to HLC
Wednesday 2-4	HLC Library	
Thursday 11-1	Pill Library	35 mins drive to Blagdon
Thursday 2.30-4.30	Blagdon Mobile Library	2.30-4.30
Friday 9.30-11.30	Long Ashton Mobile Library	9.30-11.30
Friday 1-3	Yatton Library	20 mins drive from Long Ashton

NORTH SOMERSET COUNCIL

Customer Service five year strategy



Customer Service Strategy

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Introduction by Councillor Ash Cartman

How we deliver customer service impacts everyone who comes into contact with us. North Somerset Council offers over 600 different services to our residents, businesses and partners.

We want to ensure that our customer service is consistently good across all our services. This document provides a vision of how we would like to engage with our customers and a plan to deliver improvements over the next five years.

We all experience customer service every day and we can't help but compare one experience with another. Whether it's a large multi-national with huge funds to invest in technology and customer service (such as the much-quoted Amazon) or whether it's the corner shop.

We are constantly having to manage our budgets to meet reductions in funding from central government and increased costs. We need to deliver the best service we can within the resources we have, be it people, assets or processes.

We plan to do this by putting the customer at the centre of what we are doing, to engage with you about what you need, and to use our limited resources effectively. We may not always be able to meet your every need in terms of the services we deliver across the council, but we will do the best we can and explain why if we can't.

To achieve our goals we need to strongly promote our digital services and encourage you to use them where appropriate. We recognise that digital cannot meet every need. However, promoting digital services allows us to use

our limited resources to support our most vulnerable or digitally excluded customers through other channels such as telephony and face-to-face. We recognise that we have a duty to provide reasonable adjustments for those who can't. In return, we need to make sure that our digital services are good enough and provide enough information so that you don't have to contact us another way to follow up.

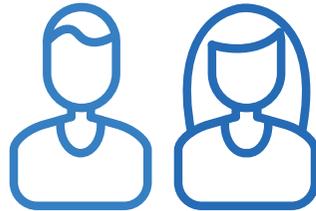
This strategy will be constantly evolving, and we will be looking for more ways to improve our services as we better understand your needs.



Scope

The purpose of this strategy is to review our customer service across the council – how we engage with you and how we can improve the way we do this

What we do now



We support
215,574 residents
(population estimate mid 2020)



We have created online forms for over
70 of our services

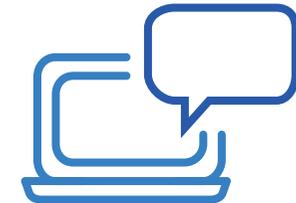
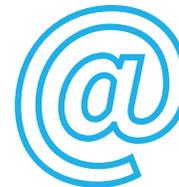


We currently offer over **80 telephone numbers** on our website



We have about **25,000 page views** a day on our corporate website

We currently offer over **100 email addresses** on our website



We have over **15 online customer-facing portals** for making applications and requests



Customer Service Strategy



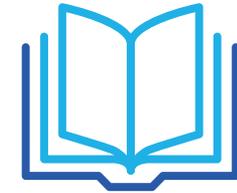
We achieved **99.5%** **satisfaction** for our telephone services in 2021

We receive about **1,140 calls** into our contact centres every day



We carry out an average of **80 face-to-face appointments** in the Town Hall every month

In 2019, **664,611 people** visited our libraries where

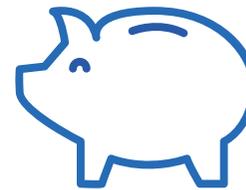


customers can access computers and WiFi

Over **90,000 customers** have set up an online account with us



In March 2021 we sent out **98,332 council tax bills**



The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman upheld **five complaints** about the council in 2020/2021



Vision

We will put our customers at the heart of what we do, listening to their feedback and reflecting it in the design and delivery of our services

Outcomes

We want:

- to provide a positive experience for our customers by being open, transparent and fair.
- our online services to be the channel of choice for most of our customers because they are so good.
- to use other channels such as telephony and face-to-face for those who need them.
- to create an environment where all officers are customer focused.

We will measure our progress over the term of the strategy and make sure we achieve our objectives. Our aim is to increase customer satisfaction and reduce the number of upheld complaints.

Why we need to change

We recognise that our customer service is not always as good as we would like it to be.

We know from customer feedback that there are things that need to be fixed or improved. Here are some of the key findings:

- There are many contact points into the council, and it can be confusing
- We need to make our online service easier to use. We need to improve and expand the ways that we gather customer feedback
- We need to provide effective and timely feedback to our customers
- We need to improve the customer experience from first contact to resolution of the issue and make sure our processes are effective and efficient
- We need to ensure our face-to-face service meets the needs of those who require it
- By planning ahead we need to focus the right resources in the right place at the right time
- We should involve customers more when we are planning to change or start new services
- We need to be more proactive in our communications to keep customers informed



Customer Service Strategy

Our customer service themes

Customer focused

We are a customer focused council, we will

- rethink the way we deliver our services, putting you at the centre of our design
- we will engage with a wide range of customers including those from equality groups
- create a culture where everyone strives to deliver good customer service
- be clear about how long it will take to get things done or to respond to you and keep you updated with progress
- treat you with empathy and professional curiosity because we want to try to understand what you want or need
- understand your experience of our services
- analyse data to understand you better and personalise services so that they meet your needs
- improve our data sharing practices so that you only need to give us your information once
- develop our online systems, helping us to understand your interactions with us so that we can be more proactive
- create a forum for residents to give us feedback on our services

- collect more customer satisfaction feedback from you and use it to improve services

Connected

We connect with our customers effectively and efficiently, we will

- make sure that we get the basics right
- aim to resolve your query at the time you raise it, or in a timely manner
- make it easy for you to feed back to us
- keep you up-to-date so that you don't need to contact us again
- provide local access to face-to-face services where required
- tell you the most direct way you can access the services you need
- deal with issues raised with your councillor in a fair, efficient and consistent way

Empowered

We empower our staff to meet our customers' expectations, we will

- ensure that all staff have the right customer service skills, treating our customers with empathy, respect and courtesy
- instil a customer service culture across the organisation to improve the customer experience
- train our officers so that they can give you the information and support you need
- encourage our officers to use their judgment and discretion in resolving issues
- improve our training around disabilities to help our staff deal with all customers more effectively
- provide appropriate technology and systems for our staff, allowing them more time to spend with you, the customer
- learn from our mistakes and adapt our processes so that we serve you better next time
- improve how we manage customer service performance and promote transparency and accountability
- embed an approach of continuous improvement across the council



Customer Service Strategy

- spend more time with those who need extra support by shifting transactional contact online
- train our officers to be better equipped to resolve your issues at first point of contact, keeping you informed of what to expect along the way

Service delivery

We provide excellent quality and value to our customers through better designed services, we will

- ensure our officers are dedicated to the customer experience and making sure that our customer service works well for you
- make sure that you are clear about what to expect from us
- join up similar services for a seamless customer experience
- improve our customer satisfaction surveys to get more feedback on how we are doing from your perspective
- use data to understand the customer experience and use this information to identify issues and solutions
- review processes within priority service areas to make customer improvements across the organisation
- ensure that there is good management in place to maintain consistently high customer service and a culture of continuous improvement

- trial solutions at low cost before delivering them fully
- monitor best practice in customer service and look at industry trends to improve customer experience
- review our contracts with our providers to make sure their customer service standards and timescales are aligned with ours
- improve our forecasting and business planning processes so that we allocate our resources most effectively

Partnership

We improve the customer experience by working with partners, we will

- use our professional curiosity to understand your needs and make referrals to 3rd parties where this would be helpful
- make it easy for you to find services offered by partners
- develop and test services with you to make sure the services we provide work for you
- work with the 3rd sector and regional partners to support those who need it the most
- work with town and parish councils to use resources efficiently and provide services where you need them

Digital

We will improve digital technologies to support a 24/7 customer experience, we will

- promote and encourage the use of our online services
- continue to modernise, using digital tools and technologies to enhance the customer experience
- empower our digital team to make changes that benefit the customer
- use digital technologies to allow us to deal with your requests and enquiries more quickly
- listen to you so that we understand how you want to communicate and interact with us digitally
- pilot new technologies and test them with you first
- use technologies to help you navigate to the correct place online
- use technology to automate processes where appropriate
- invest in our websites so that we offer accessible services, our systems are easy to use and you can find what you need quickly
- make greater use of digital technologies and data so that more time is spent providing the services you need
- be aware of upcoming technological advancements so that we are aware of anything new which could help us deliver a better service



Customer Service Strategy

What you can expect from us

Short term – Year 1

- We will ensure that our staff are competent in customer service and have an awareness of disabilities.
- We will develop and publish our customer service standards.
- We will use our Citizens' Panel regularly to see how we are doing and what we need to improve.
- We will ensure that issues raised with councillors are dealt with fairly, efficiently and consistently.
- We will provide local customer access for residents where needed.
- We will start to deliver customer service culture change.

Medium term – Years 2 and 3

- We will continue to review our website and microsites and ensure that they all meet legal accessibility requirements.
- We will increase the volume and type of call handled by our professional contact centre so that you get a consistent and reliable service.
- We will review our processes to ensure that they are as good as they can be.
- We will review our most popular services and identify ways to simplify access.

Long term – Years 4 and 5

- We will prioritise full digital access for the most popular service requests.
- We will put in place automated reminder texts and emails so you never miss a deadline or an appointment with us.
- We will ensure that our online systems will be a first choice for most, meaning that our digital offer is the most used channel.



Customer Service Strategy

How we will measure outcomes

Our vision is ambitious, and we need to ensure that we check and measure our progress across the five-year lifetime of the strategy.

We will do this by listening to you and learning from your experiences to keep improving our services. To measure our success, we will gather feedback from you and from our staff and analyse the data we collect. We will review this over the five-year period of this strategy, seeking improvements in our measures.

Your feedback:

- Customer surveys
- Public consultations
- Established community and disability groups
- Govmetrics customer satisfaction results
- Feedback from compliments, complaints and enquiries
- Feedback about equality issues

Feedback from staff:

- Engagement boards
- Responses to compliments and complaints
- Annual staff survey

Feedback from data:

- Web analytics
- Analysis of compliments and complaints
- Govmetrics responses
- Contact volumes and channels
- Analysis of themes and trends
- Service measures (key performance indicators and service level agreements)
- Channel shift data
- Mystery shopping

Each of these will have measurable targets. The targets will show continuous improvement.

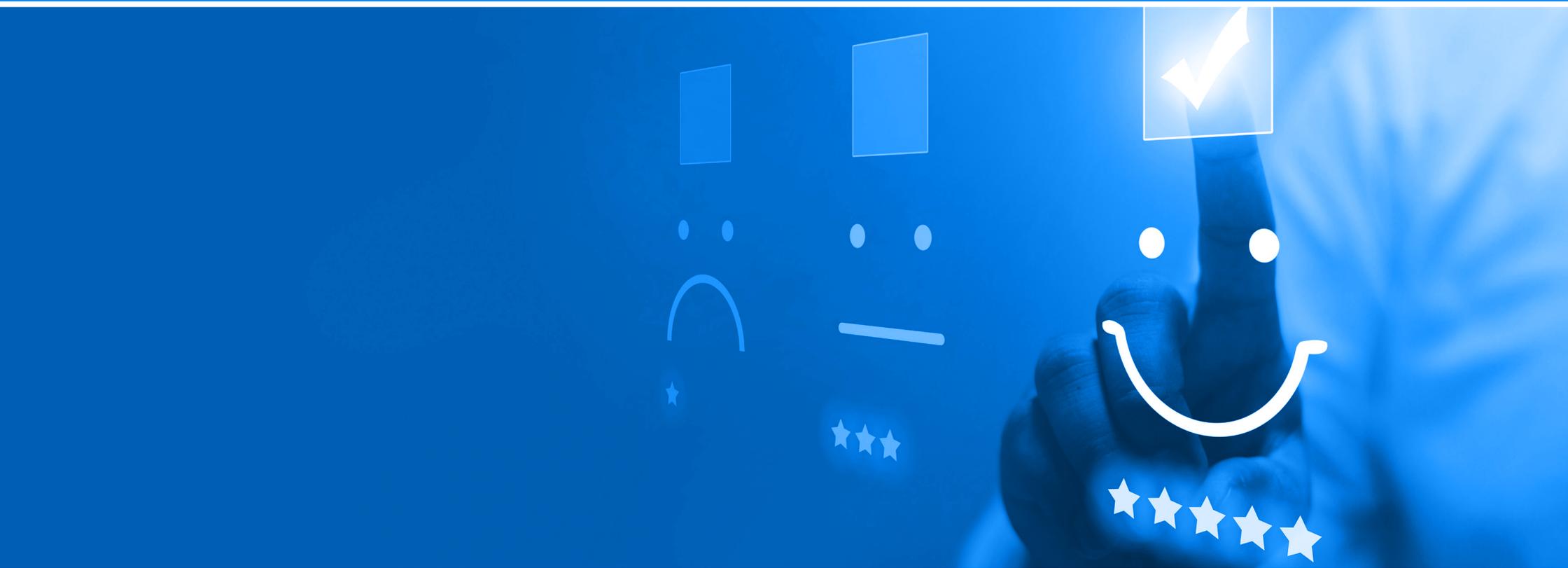
A supporting action plan has been created which will contain a detailed plan of how the ambitions will be achieved and by when. This will be included in the council's annual business planning framework. The plan will span the period of the strategy and will define actions by date. The framework will assess progress against the action plan and is reported at Directorate Leadership Teams, the Corporate Leadership Team and to the Executive and Scrutiny Panels.

We welcome your feedback on this strategy to cs.strategy@n-somerset.gov.uk



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Please contact 01934 888 802



Equality Impact Assessment

Please add content where << XXX>> is indicated.
Please make Yes or No bold as appropriate.

Service area: Customer Services

Does the topic of this assessment link

to a budget reduction proposal: No

Equality impact assessment owner: Simone

Assistant Director/Director sign off: Amy Webb

Review date: 22.3.22

1. Equality Impacts

Please make High, Medium or Low bold as appropriate

Service User Impact

Before mitigating actions	High	Medium	Low
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After mitigating actions	High	Medium	Low
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Staff Impact

Before mitigating actions	High	Medium	Low
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After mitigating actions	High	Medium	Low
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2. The Proposal

2.1 Background to proposal

(Please provide a brief explanation of the project/proposals. You should consider the impact on both customers and staff)

We are creating a new customer service strategy which will impact the whole organisation.

The document provides a vision of how we would like to engage with our customers and a plan to deliver this over the next 5 years. The aim is to improve our customer engagement and customer satisfaction over the period.

The strategy outlines how we plan to improve how we engage with our customers. We intend that the strategy will bring improvement to the way that things are done now, and that access to the council will be clearer, simpler and more transparent. Whilst the focus is in putting digital first, this is to enable us to provide alternative services for those who need it. We have been engaging with disability groups to understand their needs and these will be built into the action plan for the strategy. We plan to continue with this approach to our engagement and include other equality groups such as younger and older people and those who may find digital access difficult as a result of financial or literacy issues.

We recognise that telephony remains an important channel for some of our customers and there is still some demand for a face-to-face service for those who need to have documents scanned, who struggle with blue badge applications and with the more complex council tax and benefits enquiries. The strategy is looking at how we can improve the face-to-face offer we provide to our customers across the whole district, including in the rural areas, potentially using our Libraries to deliver this. We are also maintaining our contact centres; Council Connect, Care Connect, Council Tax and benefits and Carelink.

Following discussions with the Deaf community and the hard of hearing, we have identified a requirement for a texting service which we are investigating. We are also planning to improve advice and guidance on our website.

2.2 Please detail below how this proposal may impact on any other organisation and their customers

The Customer Service strategy talks about working in partnership with other organisations and seeks to work in partnership to support our customers. We are looking to improve signposting to other organisations. The impact should be a positive one.

Section 3 – What Do We Know?

3.1 Customer/staff profile details – what data or evidence is there which tells us who is, or could be, affected?

The Customer Service strategy has the potential to impact all residents within North Somerset Council who receive a service from us.

We have a population of about 215,000 people and diverse socio-economic groups.

3.2 What does the data or evidence tell us about the potential impact on diverse groups, and how is this supported by historic experience/data?

Customers who are presenting themselves with the need for face-to-face services are visiting us are in the main blue badge holders, are looking for help scanning documentation or have complex Council Tax or Benefits enquiries. This would suggest that the customers most in need of a face-to-face service are those with a disability or those who find it difficult to use digital technology. This pattern of face-to-face customers has been consistent over the period of appointment only and therefore we can assume that these groups are those most in need of the service. The strategy aims to further support this group by providing services across the region.

Face-to-face appointment data for December 2021:

Blue Badge Appointments	38
Scanning Documents	15
Other	10

At the Equality Stakeholder group we discussed the lack of understanding within the council of issues around deafness and we agreed that we would undertake more engagement with relevant groups. We also talked about switchboard interactive voice recording and agreed that these would be reviewed to be more accessible. There was concern about the blue badge process and this will be picked up as part of a process review within the action plan. We also agreed to update the website as there was not information about how the council supports the deaf community.

Evidence gained from the Head of Hearing group suggests that online service work for some people, whilst others get support from family or friends. There is an interest in a text service which will be considered within the action plan of the strategy.

Evidence gained from the BSL group suggests there is a need for deafness awareness training and this has already been picked up as an action. Also, there was interest in video calling with subtitles. They also talked about using text and email successful elsewhere.

Evidence gained from the disability group was that the website is hard to navigate and we talked about using google as a better option. There were

discussions around some kind of “surgery” system to provide support people more regionally.

3.3 Are there any gaps in the data, for example across protected characteristics where information is limited or not available?

We do not ask our customers as a matter of course for their demographic information. We intend to continue to engage with the Equality Stakeholder Group on what should be monitored and the methods to use. We feel that we have made good headway in engaging with and understanding the needs of the deaf community.

3.4 How have we involved or considered the views of the people that could be affected?

We have carried out consultation with staff and residents over three month period and have gained views from a wide range of people. .

- Corporate leadership team
- Senior managers with the council
- All staff advised of consultation available on the website
- Town and Parish councils
- Disability Access group
- Hard of hearing group
- BSL group
- Members
- Equality Stakeholder group

3.5 What has this told us?

Feedback from the groups engaged with has been fed into the strategy as it has developed over the 3-4 month period. Staff, public and Town and Parish councils were encouraged to participate in the online public consultation. We had 44 responses, 42 through the portal and 2 outside. The feedback has been:

- Not everyone will have access to digital
- How will we empower employees
- History of ignoring public opinion
- Little evidence that NSC acts on consultancy results. Introduce rules on this.
- History of money wasted
- Want to have main council telephone number on the website, especially for Council Tax
- Need to have the right IT tools in place to deliver, not one size fits all, and enough staff
- Specific issue raised regarding internal system Confirm.
- MyAccount should be optional and have option to have more than one photo.

- More information about what we are doing about the digitally excluded and removing barriers to digital access.
- Fix broken links on the website
- Desire to go back to reception offer in the gateway to provide face to face support for all or at least have someone who can make appointments for people
- Strategy focuses on digital, and customer needs telephony offer
- Greater clarity around the face-to-face offer
- Want to be able to do more online
- Concern about computer access in the libraries being diminished with Word no longer being available.
- Explain how you intend to achieve the strategy or the measures. What are the priorities and where is the action plan.
- Concern whether aims can be delivered.
- Nothing about working in partnership with health, parish councils, police
- Involve customers in your plans, focus on what customers wants not what NSC want to show.
- Vulnerable wouldn't have been able to access the online consultation
- Who takes ownership of reported issues and who get back to the customer?
- Like the idea of customer champions who are good at communicating with customers
- Library service would like improve ICT provision to support customers
- Local surgery to support residents
- Concern by officers that customers dictate what we do and how we do it.
- Improve feedback for online reporting so that the customer is fully informed, e.g. if you close a report for something the customer assumes it has been done and may not have been.
- Improve website navigation – could not easily find consultation
- Prefer telephony over digital
- This point was liked - improve our data sharing practices making sure that you only need to tell us your information once wherever possible.
- "Provide local customer access for residents living in rural areas" flies in the face of your aim to improve digitisation.
- What do we say is good customer service
- More emphasis on "gaps" in service
- Couldn't find evidence of a charter
- It isn't a strategy, it's statement of aspirations
- Suggested condensed to single page
- Provide a mechanism to ensure that residents without online access are aware of consultations and where to get a paper copy to respond. An address provided to return the responses. Earlier notifications recommended. North Somerset Council to notify all parish councils of its consultations.
- it is a very-difficult-to-digest list of things one after the other

The responses to these points raise will be published on the public consultation website and anything that influenced the strategy has been woven in. Some comments have been passed to the relevant departments for action as they were outside of the remit of the Customer Service strategy.

Through engagement with equalities groups, it has been made apparent that face-to-face and telephony remain important channels. The strategy supports the continuation of these channels whilst improving the digital offer.

Through engagement with the BSL and Head of Hearing groups it became clear that there is an interest in having a text service so it will become part of the action plan to investigate how we could implement this. We also discussed face-to-face which remains a preference for some, and we will look at how we can improve the face-to-face offer across the region.

3.6 Are there any gaps in our consultation, what are our plans for the future?

The consultation was extensive and carried out over a period of approximately three months. We plan to continue to engage with equalities groups to ensure that the strategy is being delivered to meet their needs.

Section 4 – Assessment of Impact

Will the proposal have a disproportionate impact on any of these groups?

Insert X into one box per row, for impact level and type.

H = High, M = Medium, L = Low, N = None | + = Positive, = = Neutral, - = Negative

Impact Level

Impact type

Summary of Impact

	H	M	L	N	+	=	-	
Disabled people		x					x	We currently have an appointment only face-to-face service in the Town Hall. It may be more difficult to access services via telephony and online. However, we will continue to meet the needs for reasonable adjustments to our services when they are requested or identified as being needed.
People from different ethnic groups		x					x	Potentially language issues over the telephone may impact ability to arrange appointment. We will continue to use an interpreter or have information provided in an alternative language to support customers whose first language is not English.
Men or women (including pregnant women or those on maternity leave)				x		x		
Lesbian, gay or bisexual people				x		x		
People on a low income		x					x	It may be that those on low income do not have access to telephony or have money to top up phones to make the call. We make arrangements that a person presenting themselves at the Town Hall in these circumstances would be offered a telephone service direct to the contact centre.

People in particular age groups	x			x	Older people may prefer a face-to-face service if they have been used to it. They may struggle to adapt. For this reason, we intend to maintain face to face appointments for those who really need them and are looking to improve the face-to-face service to make it a more regional offer.
People in particular faith groups		x		x	
People who are married or in a civil partnership		x		x	
Transgender people		x		x	

Does this proposal have any potential Human Rights implications?

Yes **No**

If 'yes', please describe

<<Text here>>

Could this proposal have a Cumulative Impact with any other budget savings?

Yes **No**

This is an impact that appears when you consider services or activities together; a change or activity in one area may create an additional impact somewhere else

If 'yes', please describe?

<<Text here>>

Section 5 – Action Plan

Where you have listed that there will potentially be negative outcomes, you are required to mitigate the impact of these. Please detail below the actions that you intend to take.

Action taken/to be taken	How will it be monitored?
1. Review impacts of the implementation of the Customer Service strategy	Continued monitoring of feedback via the contact centres, complaints and monitoring of equality issues.
2. Continued engagement with equality groups with more focus a wide range of groups, including those who are digitally excluded.	Meetings arranged, and feedback taken and acted upon.

If negative impacts remain, please provide an explanation below.

<<Text>>