

Committee: **Cabinet**

Date of meeting: **4th October 2023**

Report Subject: **Customer Service Strategy for the Council**

Portfolio Holder: **Councillor Stephen Thomas, Leader / Cabinet Member for Corporate Overview and Performance**

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Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
	24/08/2023	04.09.23			14/09/2023	04/10/2023		

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present the Council Customer Services Strategy 2023 – 2027 (hereafter ‘the strategy’) and the associated customer standards and charter to Cabinet for approval.

2. Scope and Background

- 2.1 The Customer Services landscape has changed dramatically over recent years and is constantly evolving with higher expectations of standards of service and accessibility, including the way the public receive council services.
- 2.2 The Pandemic changed customer behaviour, and the way in which public services needed to respond has given momentum to shaping a new vision for the Council’s customer offer. The lasting impact of COVID-19 has accelerated the need for the review of the Customer Services delivery model.
- 2.3 The development of our vision and approach to customer services for the Council recognises the changing public expectations which we need to plan and deliver for. It also acknowledges that different channels for different customer contacts are important alongside looking to maximise the potential for digital solutions to provide a better offer and value for money. The development of the strategy was grounded in an approach which would:
- Continue to build on our relationship with residents and strengthen the Councils reputation
 - Strive for consistency in the quality of our customer service offer across the whole Council
 - Put users at the centre of services, mapping the journey through our services through their eyes

- Defines “customer” as all residents, visitors, businesses who use the services we provide and enables us to develop mixed channels so the more complex contacts keep the human touch; and
- Improve our digital presence and ease of use so those who can self-serve are able to, helping us realise efficiencies to support our medium term financial planning.

2.4 The Strategy is underpinned by three key principles and three priorities: -

Principle One: to deliver a Positive Customer Service experience;

Principle Two: investing in our staff to support customers and to resolve queries at first point of contact where possible;

Principle Three: developing a culture that supports digital improvement, innovation and continues to make the best use of new technology;

Priority One: designing services to meet the needs of our customers;

Priority Two: delivery of a customer focused culture;

Priority Three: giving our customers the choice on how they interact with us, based on feedback.

2.5 Implementation of the strategy will be driven by a Customer Service Standards document (Appendix 2) and a Customer Service Charter (Appendix 3). It will commence on a phased basis with the emphasis on the Community Hub and Contact Centre services in the first instance before expanding to wider service areas.

2.6 In December 2022 an external review was undertaken with the aim to gain a better organisational oversight of customer service delivery across the Council. The review offered an opportunity to better understand what our customers think of the way we interact with them, the barriers they face when contacting us and views on how they would like to contact us in the future.

2.7 The findings from the review were shared with Wider Corporate Leadership Team (WCLT) and a Member briefing session held in March 2023. The main findings are set out in the performance information section of this report.

2.8 The review was used to inform the development of our strategy alongside service area knowledge and a desk top research exercise of the customer service models in other councils.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

3.1 CLT endorsed the Strategy on 24th August 2023

3.2 The Corporate Overview and Performance Scrutiny Committee recommended Option 2, namely, that an amendment is made to Appendix 2 – Customer Service Standards “When customers *contact* the Council”.

3.3 **Option 1:**

That Cabinet approves the Customer Services Strategy and associated Customer Standards and Charter;

Option 2:

That Cabinet considers the Customer Services Strategy and associated Customer Standards and Charter and suggests recommendations for changes prior to approval.

4. **Evidence of how this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

4.1 The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (Section 15), places a duty on all Local Authorities in Wales to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement. As part of this, the Council is required to develop a Corporate Plan. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 also places individual duties on public bodies. The legislation is about improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales and creating a Wales that we all want to live in, now and in the future.

4.2 The Strategy supports these objectives and the Corporate Plan priority “an ambitious and innovative Council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place.”.

4.3 The strategy is an important part of the overall governance framework and is aligned to other key Council plans and strategies including the Digital Strategy (currently in the democratic process for approval), the Commercial strategy, the Workforce Strategy, the Communication Strategy and the Decarbonisation Plan.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

5.1 ***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

5.1.1 The Strategy supports elements of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and aspects of its delivery are included within the Commercial Strategy and within the Bridging the Gap Programme.

5.1.2 There is a clear alignment to the telephony and digital programmes that are currently in progress.

5.1.3 There are no anticipated impacts on budget to deliver the core values of the strategy.

5.1.4 Staff within the Customer Service team would be required to ensure adoption of the strategy, standards and charter across the Council.

5.2 **Risk including Mitigating Actions**

5.2.1 There is a risk of non-compliance of the adoption of the strategy. Failure to comply with the ambitions of the strategy will impact the delivery and savings associated with the Strategic Financial programme called Bridging the Gap, such as:

- Reducing Third Party Spend Strategic Business Review
- Workplace Transformation Strategic Business Review
- Use of data and insight to support decision making Strategic Business Review
- Designing services around the customer Strategic Business Review
- Behavioural Insight Strategic Business Review

5.2.2 Non-compliance to the strategy will impact the delivery of the Council's Corporate Plan priorities and pose risks to the delivery of other key plans and strategies, such as:

- Digital Transformation Strategy
- Medium Term Financial Strategy
- Workforce Strategy
- Regeneration Strategy
- Education ICT Strategy
- Commissioning and Procurement Strategy
- Commercial Strategy

5.2.3 The mitigation of these risks will be monitored through officer networks (mentioned in Performance Section 6 of the report).

5.3 **Legal**

Adherence to Welsh Language Standards will be part of the delivery of the strategy.

5.4 **Human Resources**

5.4.1 Training of staff across the Council and delivery of the strategy will be undertaken with consultation with colleagues in Human Resources.

5.4.2 Attendance at Officer Networks across the Council, i.e. Future Working Programme Board and Service Design and Digital Board will support the adoption of the strategy.

5.5 **Health and Safety**

None identified.

6. **Supporting Evidence**

6.1 **Performance Information and Data**

6.2 The external review undertaken in 2022 of customer experience across the Council found:

- People value the interaction and the experience of in person customer service channels
- There are many access points and it's confusing people

- Some people lack the ability to use digital channels but not all
- Customers who are able to self-serve are opting to call for reasons including difficulty in navigating the online experience
- Often the content we communicate is misunderstood and causes confusion
- Closer working between Customer Services officers and service areas could alleviate frustrating and confusing experiences for people.

6.3 There will be a set of delivery plans against each priority set out in the strategy and will have a number of key success measures, such as % of customers accessing front facing services rating the service they receive as excellent or good; total number of complaints received per thousand populations (aligned to Council Complaints procedure)

6.4 Behavioural insight will inform delivery of the strategy moving forward.

6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***

6.2.1 To support the successful delivery of this strategy there are some clear links to the level of service that customers can expect to receive, whatever channel they choose to use.

6.2.2 Our Customer Service Standards and Charter (currently in draft – Appendix 2 and 3) underpins our customer services delivery model and describes the basic standards of service that a customer can expect from Blaenau Gwent Council.

6.2.3 Within our Customer Charter the term “customer” relates to all residents, visitors, businesses who use the services we provide.

6.2.4 Transforming our customer service delivery will undoubtedly impact on the standards outlined in our Customer Charter. It is important that these changes and their impact are considered. The charter will be reviewed and updated regularly throughout the life of the strategy.

6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

The Strategy, Standards and Charter has been developed with engagement via;

- An externally facilitated organisational review of the customer experience and access involving a range of service areas and engagement through journey mapping with customers who use our services
- User research with customers including that gained through service re design projects
- Senior management and Elected member feedback
- Undertaking desk top research and,
- Discussions with partner organisations

6.3.1 User research will be a key part of the strategy implementation moving forward.

6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

- 6.4.1 The Customer Services landscape has changed dramatically over recent years and is constantly evolving with higher expectations of standards of service and accessibility, including the way the public receive council services.
- 6.4.2 The Pandemic changed customer behaviour, and the way in which public services needed to respond has given momentum to shaping a new vision for the Council's customer offer.
- 6.4.3 The lasting impact of COVID-19 has accelerated the need for the review of the Customer Services delivery model.
- 6.4.4 Closely aligning the strategy with understanding our demographics utilising new technology will provide a pathway for future proofing the Council moving forward into the 21st Century.

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

- 6.5.1 The demands and expectations of customers and staff and the speed of digital innovation means that we need to be able to deal with the rising volume of customers' requests, who want faster, more comprehensive services across a growing range of channels
- 6.5.2 The key principles and priorities of this strategy and the Digital Strategy are aimed at those that need and want to access the Council.
- 6.5.3 The intention is to build good quality services with those that use and provide them. The additional benefits of using digital technology and innovation will support independence and better-connected communities.
- 6.5.4 Through our customer-centred design approach we will consider each element of a process and how customers use our services. Having the right culture and leadership to drive our ambition will support the development of customer-centred services.
- 6.5.5 Improved use of data, better engagement and collaboration will allow us to join up services to remove barriers between organisations so that customers can easily access what they need, supporting behaviour change where possible

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

The strategy will be shared with key partners to support working towards a more joined up public services experience for customers.

6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***

The strategy takes a whole council approach and promotes knowledge sharing across service areas.

6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***

The Community Hub model places the emphasis on delivering customer services closer to the communities.

Utilisation of digital solutions where customers are able to also supports decarbonisation, ability to transact online where customers are able

6.9 ***Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)***

See Appendix 4.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

7.1 Information will be included in the quarterly Joint finance and performance report which is part of the committee forward work programme, including an annual quarter 4 position.

7.1.2 The Future Working Programme Board chaired by the Chief Executive will receive progress updates on the implementation of the strategy.

7.1.3 The Service Design and Digital Board which has representations from across the service areas will review its terms of reference to support monitoring and delivery of the strategy.

7.1.4 A midpoint review of the strategy will be undertaken.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- Appendix 1 - Customer Services Strategy
- Appendix 2 - Customer Services Standards
- Appendix 3 - Customer Service Charter
- Appendix 4 – Integrated Impact Assessment