

WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL CABINET

7TH DECEMBER 2021

CABINET MEMBER WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR HR AND CORPORATE SERVICES: COUNCILLOR MIKE HALLAM

Report Title **Customer Experience Strategy 2021-24**

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Appendix A – Customer Experience Strategy 2021-2024

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. This report introduces the Customer Experience Strategy for West Northamptonshire Council, for the period 2021-2024. This sets out the Council's approach to identifying, meeting and exceeding the engagement needs of residents and customers, and our vision for the type of experience we want to deliver.

2. Executive Summary

- 1.2. As a new organisation, we have an ambition to become an exemplar council in how we design and deliver our services, recognised for putting people at the centre of all we do.

- 1.3. One of the main ways to achieve this is the way we engage with customers (be they residents, partner organisations, Elected Members, businesses or employees), and the way we meet their expectations and contribute to preventing needs from escalating in complexity or urgency.
- 1.4. The Customer Experience Strategy will play an important role in how we meet our vision and outcomes for the council, alongside our People Strategy, the Transformation Strategy and our digital innovation. Ultimately, the aim of the strategy is to enable the organisation to understand the needs of individuals and communities, design and implement accessible contact channels and facilitate early intervention through the provision of the right advice or service at the right time in the right manner.
- 1.5. The success of its implementation will be measured by significant reduction in failure demand (unnecessary contact due to inadequate information provision, delays or poor standards of service), reduction in hand-off points and a simplification of customer journeys.
- 1.6. By focusing on the customer, we will design and implement processes which reduce duplication, bottlenecks and unnecessary touch points, and give customers access to the right solution in the most time and cost effective way.
- 1.7. Our ambition is to become an agent in building resilience within individuals (residents and staff) and communities, by facilitating their access to advice and information, responsive services and the natural network of support available in their immediate geographical or social communities.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 It is recommended that Cabinet approves the Customer Experience Strategy 2021-2024 and supports its implementation across the Council, on the basis of all costs and financial benefits being captured as part of the Customer Experience, Intelligence and Innovation programme of work.

4. Reason for Recommendations

The Strategy allows us to align activity at the front door with the wider Council vision and priorities, and facilitates the delivery of the Council plan in the following ways:

- Green and clean: the strategy will allow people to contact us in the most effective way, in line with their needs, and will provide localised customer services where they are needed, thus reducing the need for people to travel to our offices.
- Improving life chances: increasing access to the right information and advice, at the right time, and providing wrap around support when needs are complex can be a powerful tool in levelling life and health inequalities. As such, the Customer Experience Strategy sets out how we will work with people to improve their life chances and positively influence the wider determinants of health.
- Connected communities: accessibility is one of the main themes of what we will be focusing during the implementation of the strategy. This is not just physical and technological connectivity, but also access to social networks and voluntary, community and grassroots organisations.
- Thriving villages and towns: by supporting people before needs escalate (by preventing them falling into debt, providing advice on support available, putting them in touch with the most appropriate agencies) we can contribute to making our areas of the county economically and

socially vibrant. We also want to provide services to people travelling to the county and businesses which operate here.

- Economic development: access to the right education, at all ages, and employment support are critical pre-requisites of economic health. We will make information about services available in the most accessible format, via a variety of channels, making it easier for people to remain economically resilient.
- Robust resource management: the strategy set out a number of approaches which will not only effectively manage demand, by directing people to the most effective channel, but will also save costs on the end-to-end customer journey, by removing unnecessary steps (inputting of information from one system to another, unnecessary tasks in the back office and at the front door, proactive updates to avoid chase ups etc). We are very keen to maximise the value that technology can offer, by deploying solutions such as mail-bots, phone-bots, live chat etc, so that people are assisted while navigating our services, so they get the right response, at the right time, in the right way.

5. Report Background

- 5.1 Nationally, following the Covid pandemic, there has been a significant shift in how people, even those in vulnerable categories, access information and services. People have had to become a lot more technologically resilient, and this applies to residents as well as employees.
- 5.2 It is important that we don't lose the opportunity to apply what we have learnt over the past 18 months, which is that we need to re-deploy our resources to support those people with the most complex needs and circumstances, whilst giving everyone else the tools to self-serve and interact with us in the manner most suited to their needs and expectations.
- 5.3 Feedback from residents shows that people value an individualised service ('someone took the time to listen and understand'), complete solutions and responses which are preventative rather than reactive ('the member of staff went the extra mile') and that complaints arise when people get frustrated with overcomplicated structures ('I got pushed from pillar to post') or services which don't consider individual needs and circumstances ('I had to jump through hoops').
- 5.4 Engagement activities carried out with Councillors also showed that disjointed services and incomplete responses cause a lot of additional work and escalations.
- 5.5 We also want to build on the success of the 'Three Conversations Model' deployed in Adult Social Care, and model our offer to incorporate a much wider range of information and support sources than just council services.

6. Issues and Choices

- 6.1 As a new organisation, West Northamptonshire Council has a unique opportunity to set out its intention on the type of authority it wishes to be. Bringing together four different customer services cultures, whilst all focused on resident outcomes, would be difficult in the absence of a shared vision. The strategy will allow us to focus our activities and spend to those areas which will have the greatest impact on people's outcomes.
- 6.2 The implementation of the strategy will carry a cost which will need to be fully understood against the potential efficiencies it will unlock across the whole organisation, by simplifying customer pathways, reducing waste and making it easier for people to self-serve.

6.3 We could continue to operate as we do, but this would not build on best practice, the wishes of our Elected Members and customer feedback.

7. Implications (including financial implications)

7.1 Resources and Financial

The Customer Experience Strategy will be delivered through the Customer, Intelligence and Innovation programme, which will carry its own financial requirements and benefits. Should any additional funding be identified as part of the implementation of the strategy, this would be subject of approval at a future Cabinet meeting once quantified.

7.2 Legal

There are no legal implications arising from the proposals.

7.3 Risk

There are no significant risks arising from the proposed recommendations in this report.

7.4 Consultation

The Strategy was developed following repeated engagement with the Customer Services division over the first 6 months of the organisation, workshops with the Executive Leadership Team and Assistant Directors, as well as two sessions with Councillors carried out in early November. Early piloting of the approach highlighted in the strategy took place with Revenues and Benefits services, with the Customer Services hub in Towcester contacting customers who found themselves in payment arrears, and proactively taking payments and offering advice where other issues were identified. Engagement with other service areas will continue throughout the implementation of the strategy, to ensure that it aligns with new ways of working deployed across the organisation.

7.5 Consideration by Overview and Scrutiny

Engagement with the Elected Members has also included members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This was an opportunity to discuss the design principles of the strategy and apply some of these to worked case studies relevant to constituents.

7.6 Climate Impact

The implementation of the Customer Experience Strategy will have a positive climate impact by reducing travel to our offices, and where this is necessary, by placing outreach activity where the need is highest.

7.7 Community Impact

The Strategy will have a positive impact on community development and cohesion, as one of its building blocks is the ambition to put people in touch with resources available on their doorstep, in their local community.

7.8 Communications

The Strategy will form the basis of ongoing communications with residents and staff, as its implementation progresses.

8. Background Papers

Appendix A: Customer Experience Strategy 2021-2024