



**West
Northamptonshire
Council**

Fresh Start

Bright Future

**Customer
Experience
Strategy
2021–2024**



Trust | High Performance | Respect | Innovate | Value | Empower

Placing customers at the heart of everything we do



I am delighted to introduce our first Customer Experience Strategy which sets out how we will become a council which places you, the customer, at the heart of everything we do.

Our Council's vision is to make West Northamptonshire a great place to live, work, visit and thrive, and this document will show some of the ways we will be doing this, by working with our employees, other agencies and businesses in the county, but most importantly you, our residents, to make the vision a reality. I am confident we can make this vision a reality and as a result make things better for all.

**Councillor Mike Hallam
Cabinet Member Human Resources
and Corporate Services**

Introduction

We want to be ambitious in what we set out to achieve as a new council, and over the next 3 years we want to make West Northants an exemplar council across the country, one that puts you, the customer, at the centre of what it does and how it behaves, providing a new standard of customer experience in local government.

Customer Experience is how you feel when you interact with us. Maybe you need to get in touch to let us know you are moving, or you want to ask us to collect some bulk waste for you, or you find out on your social media account about something we are doing – regardless of your reasons, and the way you engage with us, we want this to be a positive experience.

We want everyone who interacts with us to receive

the high levels of service we all expect as people living in the county, visiting or working here, as employees for the Council, or whether we represent businesses, organisations or communities.

We will do this by providing a consistent, outstanding customer experience across the organisation, regardless of who you are, or what service you may require. This means that it is not just our Customer Services Department who will work towards delivering this strategy, but all our employees and partners, so that whenever and wherever you interact with us, the West Northamptonshire Council brand is one you trust.

We are keen to engage with our communities to understand their needs, and how they want to reach us, or for us to reach them, so that we can deliver intelligent services, which help people find answers to questions, get services they need and have the tools they need to stay independent and help each other.

We want to be quick to react to your needs, but even more, be able to prevent some of these needs from occurring. We can only do this by being flexible in how we work, and by focusing our limited resources where they are most needed. We know people would rather do things for themselves whenever possible, so we will make sure this option is there. Where it isn't safe or possible to give you the tools to resolve these issues, or where you want to speak to someone, we will make sure that our people are trained well, have the tools needed and the passion to work with you.

Our customers are...

- People who live in West Northants
- Visitors to the area
- Employees of WNC
- Businesses
- Other agencies (Police, Health, Central Government)
- Elected Members and Councillors

The background of the page features several paper cutouts of human figures in various shades of brown and tan, arranged in a line and holding hands, symbolizing community and support. The text is overlaid on green horizontal bars.

Why we need to focus on customer experience

Society is changing and so is our way of communicating

How do you stay in touch with your extended family? How do your children talk to friends? How do you find a new job? As a council we are just one of the many organisations you may need to interact with.

Prevent needs from getting worse

It is a lot better for people to have their issues resolved at the earliest opportunity than allow them to get worse and cause a distress, cost money or require a lot of time. In the same way, it is better for us as a council to step in early, whenever possible, and not allow matters to escalate.

Resident trust

As public services, it is important that we can demonstrate value and that our residents trust us to do the right things for them and advocate for them.

Affordability

With an ever-increasing population and more complex economical pressures, it is more important than ever that we get it right first time. Chasing a response, having to contact us repeatedly because we made a mistake, complaining – these are all costly actions, for you, as customer, and us as a service.

Wellbeing, health and wealth

Access to the right information and advice, and early access to support are key in helping us all stay healthy, make the right choices for ourselves and our families, and make it easy to access the support of our local communities.

What we want to achieve

To offer the same range of customer services no matter how you contact us or where you live, in a way which is recognisable by all and at a high standard of quality.

- To understand what people want and need so that we can plan appropriately.
- To increase your satisfaction by focusing on you, as a person, and your strengths and needs, rather than our processes.
- To do the right thing, at the right time, in the right way and make the most of the West Northants pound.
- To make sure that your issue is resolved as quickly as possible, and whenever possible, by the first person you speak to or the first to pick up your case.
- To provide you with the information you may need through our website and social media, in a way that makes it easy to find what you are looking for.
- To guide you towards information which may also be useful so that you don't spend time having to contact numerous teams and departments, be it on the website, through our phone lines or through social media.
- To allow you to access information and services in the way which works for you, and in the place that's accessible to you – this may be on your phone, 24/7, over the telephone or by speaking to someone face-to-face
- To give our employees the means to provide excellent services by recruiting the right people, training them well, building on their knowledge and skills and giving them the power to do the right thing
- To live and breathe our council values of THRIVE (Trust, High Performance, Respect, Innovation, Value and Empowerment) and model these in our behaviours as employees of West Northants Council, regardless of what we do in our job, where we work across the county or which service we are employed in.

What we will do

It is important that firstly, we understand you and what is important to you as a person, to your family or your neighbourhood. That we know how you like to contact us, and for us to respond, and that whenever possible we anticipate these preferences and make them available to people.

We know that most people in the county will only need to get in touch very rarely – to make an appointment for a birth registration, to apply for a school place or to make a planning application for a house extension. These people will, often, have access to a smart phone and be comfortable completing these requests online, at a time and from a place that's convenient to them. We want to make information and services available in this format as often as possible, so that you have choice and the power to act in your own interest.

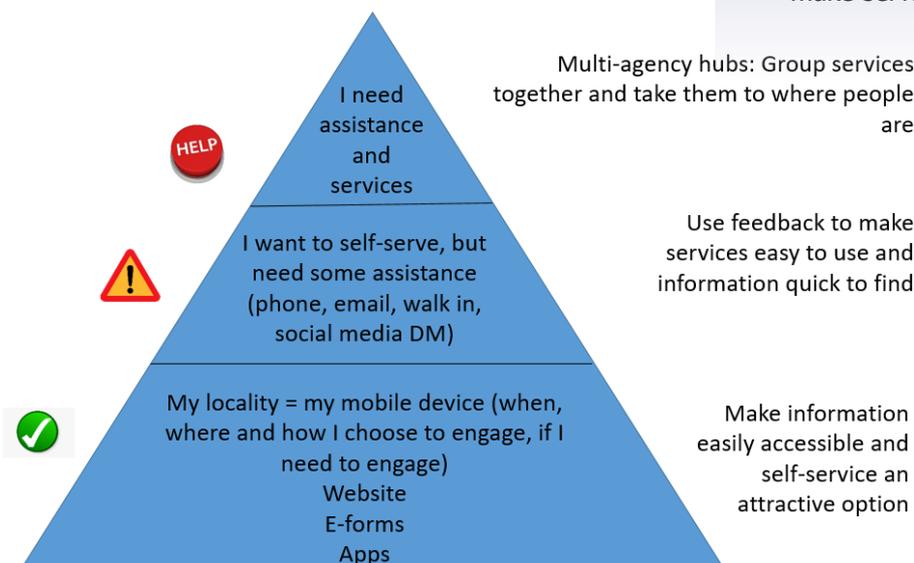
At the other end of the spectrum, some of our residents are very vulnerable, have high needs and complex situations. These are the people we want to support in a more hands-on way, by being where they are (at the end of the phone, in our One Stop Shops or present in community hubs in their immediate neighbourhood).

Our employees should have the knowledge and access to systems which will allow them to meet people half-way, and wrap around the right support at the right time. It may be that an elderly person becomes more frail and needs help accessing some support to live at home.

We would ensure that not only we refer to the relevant services within and outside of the Council, but also that we make them aware of the benefits that may be entitled to and help them apply for them, discuss their housing options if appropriate, and also put them in touch with local voluntary or community groups which may be of interest.

How we aim to achieve this

- **Simple questions or requests receive a fast response** – this might be through self-service, and easy to find and understand content online (FAQs, interactive navigation, videos showing you how to complete forms etc).
- **Complex issues receive a complete solution from all the relevant agencies** – where needs and requests are complex and touch on a number of services, we will ensure that these services work together to resolve the issues in full. This may mean that we operate in multi-agency hubs, where other partners come together to support you – Citizen Advice, Job Centre Plus, Community Law, Health providers etc.
- **We act on feedback** – we will not only respond to complaints or comments, but will also review how we do things so that we avoid other people having the same experience. Where possible, we will make changes to how we work based on what you tell us.
- **We meet you where you are** – you might prefer to speak to us via SMS, or live chat, rather than having to call us. Equally you might want guidance to find your way around our website yourself. We will make these options available and support all customers regardless of how they choose to contact us.
- **Make every interaction count** – if we send you a leaflet about our waste collection schedules over the Christmas period, we should also use this opportunity to let you know about other related services which might be relevant, such as assisted bin collection, which could prevent frail or disabled residents from having to go out in cold and slippery conditions to put their bin at the bottom of their drive.
- **Build resilience in each person, in communities and in our employees** – give everyone the information they need to make the right choices for themselves, connect people with their communities and make services accessible and easy to use.



For our residents

We will meet you half-way: We will work with you to prevent issues from getting worse, and will make ourselves available in the ways that you want to contact us, including by having a presence in those areas where we know the need is greater

The first port of call for the majority of people should be the Council's website.

Most people will go online and search for the service or information they need. We know that usually what causes confusion is the fact that whilst we all know what we need help with, we might not know what the answer or solution is. This is why it is important to make it really easy for everyone to find the right information online.

This means that if you type into the search function 'help at home', our website should guide you to those answers and contacts which will help you. The traditional way of organising services and information is in line with council services. But people's lives are organised around live events (moving to a new house, the birth of a child, bereavement etc.), and we should present our information in ways that mirror this.

Therefore searching for 'help at home' should show you available domestic help in your area (privately arranged and paid for, voluntary and community organisations, information about the process of referrals to adult social care etc.), but also assistive technology (for example, a personal safety pendant), equipment to make life easier around the house, adaptations – for private owners or tenants, as well as social housing tenants. And so on. You may not have been aware that simple equipment around the house is available to support, and we should always ensure that we inform you of all the relevant information for your situation.

The website should also offer you the option of live chat – so that if you need advice navigating the different pages, you get immediate assistance.

It may be that your situation is more complex than a simple online service – in that case, we would recommend that you contact us, so that an advisor can discuss your needs over the telephone. The way you contact us should always be your choice, and the most appropriate to your situation.

When you ring us, our interactive call systems should allow you to select the option closest to your need, but also guide you towards the quickest way to answer or

resolve your query. For example, you may have logged a complaint with us via our website, received a confirmation email to tell you we are investigating it, but would now like to find out what is happening. The voice recordings on our phone line should guide you by asking if you are looking to log a new complaint, or get an update on an existing one. For existing ones, we should find out if you want to give us additional information, or just get an update. If an update is what you are looking for, we should always offer you the option of emailing or texting you when the complaint moves to the next stage. Alternatively, we might need to advise you if we are still working on it, and are within the advised 20 working days. It may be that you hadn't realised that it is yet too early to have received a response, and once this information is shared by the automated recording, you are happy to hang up. This is quicker than waiting to speak to an advisor, and gives you a full answer immediately.

- **West Northants Council website – e-forms, citizen account, updates**
- **Live chat**
- **SMS**
- **Phone with intelligent screening and routing**
- **Email – with mail-bots resolving a large proportion of queries**
- **Face-to-face in multi-agency local hubs in those areas where we know the needs are high – walk-ins for emergency situations, appointments**

If you need to speak to one of our staff, we will make sure that we have already directed you to the right agent, who will be trained to deal with your issues in full, and only transfer to someone else when absolutely necessary. If your situation (personal needs, complex circumstances etc) makes it easier to discuss and resolve issues face-to-face, we will encourage you to meet with us.

Our walk-in venues will be welcoming, located in areas that are easy to access by public transport, and will offer access to a number of other services (Adult Social Services, Children's Early Help, financial and debt advice services, community law, and many more). This means that not only we have the information and skills to resolve your request, but you can also easily access other sources of information and support, as needed.

For our colleagues

For our employees

Our customer service advisors want to be able to respond and resolve issues in full. This means they need the right information at their fingertips, access to the right colleagues and the skills to get to the root of a problem. We want to develop the environment which allows them to do the best possible job and provide you as a customer with an outstanding experience.

It is also important that anyone in West Northants Council shares our values and a passion for doing the right thing, and is enabled to deliver a high standard of service. We will work with employees across all services and at all levels to ensure that we recruit, train and help develop people in line with our values and a commitment to put people at the heart of everything we do.

- Phone and IT systems which can be used anywhere
- Access to information about the resident and their open cases
- Access to colleagues within the Council and other organisations
- Skills, knowledge and the power to resolve issues they are equipped to resolve
- Fast ways of giving feedback to the rest of the organisation and the power to influence how we do things based on what people tell us
- Support to all employees through self-service and easy and fast access to their employment information
- A consistently high level of service to support them in all matters related to employment – recruitment, training, payroll etc.

For our elected members

Our Councillors are valued ambassadors of our values and strategy, as well as customers. It is important that what we are doing to support you and our staff is also supporting Members to serve their constituents and gives them the access and resources they need.

Responsiveness and completeness of responses is essential. If you contact your Councillor to get them to intervene on your behalf, we want to know what led to the need to escalate. It may be that we failed to provide a response when you contacted us directly – this is important to know so that we can improve how we work.

- Members enquiries channel
- Direct phone line
- Escalation routes
- Reports produced for Cabinet and Council Leader to improve engagement and communications

Next steps

Over the next 3 years, our priorities will be achieved by focusing on the following areas:

- Upgrading our telephony so that we can offer you easier and faster access to our agents when you need to speak to someone.
- Making our website easy to use, accessible and organised in a way which helps you navigate to the right information.
- Automated tools to help you find your way around our website and telephone options, so that you get the answers you need as quickly as possible (ChatBots, PhoneBots).
- Artificial Intelligence to route and deal with your contact (MailBot).
- Rolling out a single system across the Council which helps us identify you and the cases you have open with us, but also allow us to keep you up to date.
- Web forms which not only allow us to collect information from you, but also allocate the work to the right person and keep you updated on progress.
- Developing our locality presence, working with other services within and outside of the Council, so that we can run surgeries where you are.
- Training our teams so they can give advice and guidance on a range of services, in line with relevant events in your life, and not have to transfer you unnecessarily.
- Recruit, train and develop our employees to have the skills and values which put all customers at the centre of everything we do.
- Member Caseload system which allows Elected Members to manage queries from their constituents.
- Integrated helpdesk for our employees, so that we can support them effectively, regardless of what service they need.

MAKE IT
HAPPEN

Case study:

Doris

Doris is in her late 70s, and lives in a village. She lost her husband, Michael, three months ago. They were married for 50 years.

Michael previously dealt with all the finances, including any direct debits and standing orders for utilities and bills. The majority showed Michael as the sole liable party.

When Doris registered Michael's death, she used the Council's Tell Us Once service, which passes the notification onto certain Government departments to update their systems.

The Revenues team of the Council received a notification and updated the council tax account to be in Doris's name as the form showed she was still living at the property. An opening bill was sent to the property, which confused Doris, because a bill had already been received in March. Knowing that Michael dealt with that at the time, Doris discarded the letter.

A month passed and Doris received a reminder letter for unpaid tax from the Council. Doris was certain that this had already been sorted out by Michael, so again disregarded the letter.

A couple of weeks later, Doris received a Court summons for unpaid tax. This came as a shock and caused her severe distress.

Doris phones the Council and discovers that the direct debit for the account was cancelled because it was in Michael's name. The advisor can see how distressed Doris is and gets the summons removed. They also check that Doris is the only person at the address, and apply a 25% single occupancy discount which immediately reduces the amount due.

During the conversation, Doris reveals that she is struggling financially and is finding it hard to pay her bills. She is also feeling isolated in the village because she is not a confident driver and avoids longer journeys.

The advisor encourages her to apply for council tax reduction. Doris is happy to use her laptop at home to do this, so the advisor sends her the details. With Doris's permission, they also complete a referral to the Money Advice team so they can discuss any help available to her.

The advisor also suggests speaking to family members and neighbours to see if they can help. Doris hadn't wished to bother anybody but could now see how this could help her. By the end of the call Doris is clear on what she needs to do, is happier and feel supported.



Case study:

Jade

Jade is 22 and has two children under three. She approached the One Stop Shop at 2:30pm on a Tuesday, accompanied by the Police as she had been made homeless.

She had to leave her previous address in Rugby due to experiencing domestic and financial abuse from her ex-partner, who upon release from serving a prison sentence, located her via Instagram.

On arrival at the One Stop Shop she was clearly distressed and had only one small bag that had a few documents and her anxiety medication, and one suitcase containing some items of clothing for herself and the children.

Due to the circumstances, Jade was taken to the Family Room – a large, bright, child-friendly space with play seating – so her three-year-old could stay in the room and be occupied while the Advisor talked to Jade about her situation and the help available.

Having captured information about Jade's situation, the officer emails the details to the Housing Options team so they can complete a full homeless assessment and locate suitable temporary accommodation.

During the conversation, Jade revealed that the Police removed her and the children from the property at 10am that morning, and they hadn't eaten since the previous day. The One Stop Shop holds a mini foodbank with provisions provided by a local charity, so Jade and the children were given something to eat while they waited to be seen by the Homeless Assessment team.

Because Jade disclosed that she had been experiencing financial abuse and did not have any money or a bank card, the advisor also made a referral to the foodbank and raised an order for a foodbank voucher.

The officer was also able to provide a mini food parcel for Jade and the children containing food and toiletries that they could take with them to the temporary accommodation that the Homeless Assessment team sourced.

With Jade's permission, the advisor also arranged an appointment for Jade with an outreach worker from the Department of Work and Pensions based in the One Stop Shop, who provides a drop-in advice surgery for Universal Credit claims.

Case study:

Norris

Norris has a physical disability, and learning difficulties. Norris lives alone and has been struggling to move his bins by himself. He has carers who visit a couple of times a day but only one of them is happy to put his bin out for collection.

This caused confusion as one crew were used to the bin being left out, and the other crew were recording on the system that the bin wasn't out and therefore wasn't being emptied.

Norris called the Council a number of times to report a missed bin collection and has become very frustrated, both with the crew and with himself. He feels useless because he can't do the things that he has previously managed to do for himself.

The advisers have spoken to Norris a few times recently and have a good rapport with him. He enjoys telling them about the ladies that help him around his bungalow. The advisor gets agreement that the crews would collect Norris' bins from his back gate and

return them to the same place once they had been emptied. The adviser emailed the crew's team leader to explain what had been causing the confusion and what had been agreed with Norris and his carers.

Norris is incontinent which results in extra waste, and the confusion had particularly impacted his general waste collection to the point where there was now significant additional waste.

The advisor offered to order him an additional bin on the grounds of medical requirements. After a courtesy call to check that he had received the extra bin and how the arrangements were working, Norris reported that he was very happy.

His carers also reported that Norris is much more relaxed because he is no longer worrying about his bins. These days he enjoys looking out for the crew and waving to them as they pass his living room window to collect and return his bin.