

CUSTOMER FIRST

Customer Strategy
2007 - 2010

April 2007

Stratford on Avon District Council

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Stratford on Avon District Council is part way through delivering an ambitious council wide improvement plan. The change programme contains three priority themes; Communication, Trust and Empowerment, and Customer Focus.

1.2. Customer focus will be addressed as part of this customer strategy. Communication, trust and empowerment are also important elements that will be reflected in the design, delivery and management of the developing action plan.

1.3. For Stratford on Avon District Council to be truly customer or resident focused, everyone within the Council must also be committed to the principles of customer focus. It is equally important that our contractors, suppliers and partners are similarly signed up to the same principles.

1.4. There are already a number of customer focussed improvement activities underway and planned across the Council. The Customer Strategy serves to bring those activities together to provide a consistent reference point for everyone.

1.5. The customer strategy aims to provide the Council, its Members and officers with a single vision of customer service at Stratford on Avon District Council. There will also be a set of guiding principles that underpin the Council's commitment to putting the customer at the heart of everything it does.

1.6. The recently published Local Government Bill includes a theme; **stronger local partnerships**, put Local Area Agreements (LAA) on a statutory footing with wider scope and importance and a duty to co-operate between named partners.

1.7. The Varney report, entitled *Service Transformation: a better service for citizens and businesses, a better deal for the taxpayer*, published in December 2006, reinforces the need for public services to deliver much better and more efficient customer service supported by technology.

1.8. LAA indicators are being developed with partners to support the improved access under the theme of "Stronger communities". This will form part of the customer access work being carried out as part of Warwickshire direct Partnership.

1.9. The Digital challenge provides an opportunity to exploit technology to meet the needs of residents and businesses by breaking down some of the barriers to services. The impact of the Digital Challenge on the customer strategy will be assessed and reflected on the respective work programmes as soon as more information becomes available.

1.10. The strategy does not include detailed actions. It will be complimented by Action Plans which set out how the aims contained in this document will be translated into actions. The action plans will include more detailed information on the issues, how they will be addressed, and the measures and targets to be achieved. Additionally, reference to all available consultation, survey and feedback information will be made, and where necessary further consultation will be carried out to ensure all activities included are appropriate, relevant and based on need.

2. CURRENT POSITION

2.1. The physical environment is an important element in understanding customer behavior. The look and feel of the area where the Council receives customers needs to be consistent at all access points. The Council Offices at Elizabeth House have recently been modernised. The layout is clean, corporate, and more customer

friendly. An area office review has recently been carried to consider the use of existing facilities across the district including those offered in Alcester, Shipston and Southam.

2.2. The Council is now reviewing its information leaflets. Not all of the Council's existing publications are in plain language and some are out of date. Letters to customers are not always customer friendly and there is inconsistency in the way that the council responds to enquiries.

2.3. Customer consultation and feedback are systematically undertaken yet the resulting opportunities to impact service provision are not exploited. The Council has a published complaints policy, but has some way to go in using complaints system as an effective mechanism to inform the improvement in the quality of services.

2.4. In 2004 the Best Value Satisfaction survey returned a 54 per cent overall weighted satisfaction with the Council, and a 32 per cent weighted satisfaction with complaint handling. Results for 2006 show 55 per cent overall weighted satisfaction with the Council, and a 39 per cent weighted satisfaction with complaint handling

2.5. The Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI) survey undertaken in July 2006 showed an overall satisfaction score for all respondents of 73.3 per cent, which is an increase of 1.7 per cent on 2004.

2.6. A report produced by the Leadership Factor in December 2006, analyses the results of a customer satisfaction survey conducted by Stratford-on-Avon District Council in 2006. The analysis is relative to other similar surveys carried out by The Leadership Factor. This enables the Council to measure its performance in relation to other organisations, and establish a benchmark, in order to monitor relative progress in customer satisfaction.

2.7. The Satisfaction Benchmarking Report referred to in 2.6 above shows that the CSI score for service users of 70.9 per cent places the Council in the bottom quartile of organisations in the league table.

2.8. It is recognised that many residents neither understand nor care which tier of government, or authority, is responsible for service provision. Most people see the district council as a point of access or a gateway to a whole range of government and public services.

2.9. The Council is involved in a project with all other Warwickshire authorities to develop a "Joint Customer Access Strategy". The focus of this groups work will be to identify access channels and opportunities for efficiencies through shared technologies and skills. This work will compliment the Councils own Customer Strategy.

2.10. The work done across the Council to date, coupled with the significant investment made, acts as a springboard for the Council to make a real impact and positively promote customer excellence, whilst improving both reputation and performance.

2.11. The Council has already made efforts to improve access to services for customers. Its achievements are listed below.

- The Council set up a contact centre that opened to the public in May 2005;
- The Council modernised its offices which included closure of all service based reception points and the development of a one-stop shop service on the ground floor of Elizabeth House;

- A fully transactional council website was launched in 2005.;
- The Council met the e-government requirements by December 2005;

However, there may be number of ways that residents, businesses, users and customer's access needs may be better served.

3. Existing Policies

3.1. In developing the Customer Strategy consideration has been given to existing policies, with particular reference to the community plan, corporate strategy and the workforce development plan.

3.2. **Community Plan** - The Stratford District Partnership developed the community plan in 2005. This comprises of over 100 organisations including- Stratford on Avon District Council, Warwickshire County Council, Warwickshire Police, South Warwickshire Primary Care Trust and Council for Voluntary Service

The community plans' three guiding principles reflects the district residents' requirements. Two of the principles will, in part at least, be reflected within the customer strategy.

- **Provide equality for all** – Many factors including the rural nature of much of the District and the make up of it's population, mean that some residents do not enjoy the same opportunities or access to services as others. This will be addressed by working towards breaking down barriers and ensuring everyone enjoys equal access to the services available.
- **Help develop communities to meet their needs** – Not every community can support the same level of facilities. Residents expect help to meet everyday needs.

3.3. **Corporate Strategy** – The Corporate Strategy includes five Values, all of which will be demonstrated in the outcomes arising from the customer strategy. Three of the values are of particular relevance:

- Accessibility
- Working together
- Inclusiveness

Three Aims each with broad objectives form the basis of the corporate strategy. One of these aims, *the creation of inclusive communities*, sets out a need to tackle rural isolation by improving area offices and delivering more services from them.

The specific objective of 'improving access to services across the district will be met by the target, subject to partnership working, to open a one stop shop in Southam, and identify locations for others across the district by April 2008

In addition, as well as delivering the specific objectives and targets above, the following actions,

- Improving services each year.
- Delivering the Improvement Plan

will be reflected, as appropriate, in any activity plans developed for the customer strategy.

3.4. **Workforce Development Plan** – This aims to get “the right people in the right place at the right time”. Together with the Councils revised appraisal scheme which has been designed with a new competency framework, the necessary support mechanism is available to address issue of customer focus at all levels in the workforce. Competencies will also be used as a basis for future recruitment and selection, ensuring that new staff have the required behaviors and skills.

4. Customer Strategy

4.1. The change programme commits the Council to developing a Customer strategy and makes explicit reference to a requirement for the development of a vision for customer services at Stratford on Avon District Council.

4.2. The customer strategy will further strengthen position for the Council in realizing its ambition of achieving excellence. The Council is passionate about providing an excellent customer experience and wants to make a significant improvement in its performance. All service providers need to ensure that services to customers are improving steadily and consistently. This is critical to delivering excellent services.

4.3. The Council’s ‘customers’ are the generally regarded as the community it serves. The community includes those to whom it provides services. It also includes those to whom services are not provided but with whom the Council interacts and engages.

4.4. It is recognised that residents do not welcome the term “customers”. However, the generic term “customer” used within the Customer strategy is intended to include businesses, partners, private and voluntary organisations, as well as service to service relationships within the Council.

4.5. The customer sees local government as a single organisation and therefore the Council’s processes need to be reviewed and simplified in order to function in this way. Service providers need to be responsive to customers, taking the customer perspective, and feel concern for their customers. Customer feedback – surveys, complaints, and suggestions – should help inform service development. The Council needs to demonstrate standard behaviors to succeed in improving customer care. The image staff project over the telephone and in written communication will affect the perception of the whole Council.

4.6. Everyone in the Council must be a customer champion. Through the new competency framework managers and staff will be assessed to ensure that everyone works to the ethos of ‘putting the customer at the heart of everything we do’.

4.7. Initially, key messages may be cascaded through to all levels of staff by way of senior managers to promote customer focus as a key priority for the Council. This will work to maintain the momentum and enthusiasm of each group of service providers. Everyone will be expected to think about what they can do and how they can change to improve things for the customer.

4.8. **Vision** – At the heart of the customer strategy is a vision. This simple statement makes the intent of the Council’s customer strategy explicit and clear. The focus of the efforts in developing the action plans for the strategy will be based on consistency, excellence and improving the customer experience.

4.9. The vision for the customer strategy is:

"A consistently excellent customer experience"

4.10. In practical terms this vision means that for all services and activities the Council will:

- Always put the customer first
- Listen to and act on feedback
- Be courteous at all times
- Have a recognised and trusted brand
- Perform above our published standards
- Deliver the highest quality of work, within available resources
- Keep everyone informed
- Communicate in plain language
- Promote ease of access and equality of access to services

Detailed action plans will include information on how these will be measured and the targets to be achieved.

5. Principles

Before detailed actions are finalised and plans for implementation agreed, there must be a mutual appreciation of the vision. Everyone must have a clear understanding of the behaviors, attitude and commitment necessary to creating an excellent customer experience.

Therefore, a set of key principles will underpin the development and delivery of the customer strategy actions. The principles are shown in Appendix A together with their relationship to 4.10 above. Everyone will be expected to follow these principles in everything that they do and demonstrate the appropriate behaviors to meet customer needs.

Although simple to understand these principles may require significant effort to implement depending on the relative maturity of services in relation to the true concept of customer focus and customer care.

Over the next few years' progress will be made in attaining improvement against each of the principles. With each level of improvement the Council should expect a positive step change in the customer experience. By following a customer focused approach to improving services each year, and by setting ever more ambitious targets, the Council will make significant progress towards achieving excellence.

6. Customer Strategy Aims

Aim 1 - Improvement in Customer satisfaction

The Council will ensure that the needs of our residents, businesses and users are understood. The Council will explain how the information obtained from consultation, feedback and surveys has influenced the work of the Council. The Council will publish the levels and standards of service that can be expected and will provide regular updates of the Council's performance against the standards.

Objectives

- Review the existing standards and publish a revised set of Corporate promises by March 2008
- Increase in overall Council CSI from 73.3 per cent in 2006 to 77 per cent by December 2008.
- Increase satisfaction of the service users CSI score from 70.9 in 2006, to 75 per cent by December 2008

Aim 2 – To be recognised [by the public and other local authorities] as providing excellent customer service

The Council will continue to develop the customer experience with services by using a recognised framework. The range and level of services available will be based on need and prioritised based on the resources available.

Objectives

- By December 2009 exceed standards contained within the Council's emerging "Customer Promises" by 1 per cent
- Attain the quality accreditation, Charter Mark, in Customer Services by December 2008
- By December 2009, attain the quality accreditation, Charter Mark, in at least two further services
- Develop proposals by 2010 for attainment of a council wide Charter Mark by 2012
- By December 2012 demonstrate effective working with at least three with other organisations, to share the good practice of Stratford-on-Avon D.C

Aim 3 – The access to and quality of services will be recognised as appropriate for meeting the needs of the districts residents.

The Council will ensure people have easy access to high quality services in ways that meet their needs. The Council will provide information to people about services and ensure support is readily available at easy points of access including one stop shops, telephone and internet

Objectives

- By December 2007, eighty five per cent of feedback forms from exit surveys at one stop shops to be either good or very good.
- By December 2007, less than 1 per cent of feedback forms to score very poor
- By December 2008, ninety per cent of feedback forms and exit surveys at one stop shops to be either good or very good
- By December 2008, less than 0.5 per cent of feedback forms to score very poor
- Commence a pilot for a mobile one stop shop by April 2008
- Subject to partnership working, develop a joint customer access strategy by March 2008

7. Promises

7.1. Promises (similar to service standards) will be developed during 2007. A published set of promises will be a commitment, by the Council, to customers of the **minimum** level and/or standard of service that can be expected. It is performance against these promises that the reputation of the council in terms of "customer satisfaction" will be judged.

7.2. These will apply across all Council services and will be piloted as part of the Customer Strategy. The promises will be based on the actual capability of each service. This approach requires an honest assessment of the level of service that can be reasonably achieved taking into account priorities, available resources, and other planned commitments.

7.3. The Council is accountable for service provision whether the service is provided in-house, through a contractor or together with a strategic partner. Therefore these promises will, in future, apply to the contractors and partners who provide services on behalf of the Council.

7.4. Performance against these promises will be constantly monitored. The promises will be reviewed annually and will be updated to reflect customer feedback and performance monitoring as appropriate. Promises based on capability mean that the Council is less likely to over promise and under deliver.

7.5. In addition to the published promises, services will be working to internally agreed "stretch targets" that exceed the level and standards contained in the published promises. This approach ensures that in an effort to continually improve, the reputation of services that meet or exceed published promises, but fall short of the stretch target, is not damaged

8. .Communication

Awareness and understanding of the Council's customer strategy will be addressed through a variety of means, both internally and externally, as appropriate, including;

- Newsletters
- Briefings
- Presentations
- Workshops

9. Conclusion

The Council's customer strategy is ambitious and has the support of Councilors and senior management.

Whilst committed to the Council's ambition of excellence it is recognised that services need a consistent framework and set of adopted principles to ensure that the experience of citizens, customers, visitors, businesses, users and partners is excellent.

Rather than creating a long list of new and additional tasks, this strategy seeks to bring together those activities underway or planned, and focus them in terms of the customer, to assist Members and Officers alike to attain "excellence for customers" outlined at the beginning of this strategy.

APPENDIX A

The Principles of Customer Service Excellence

1. Five minute maximum waiting time
2. Considerate and empathetic response
3. Reliability of systems and technology
4. Swift reparation
5. Knowledgeable staff
6. Empowerment (front line ownership)
7. Aim to exceed expectations
8. Right first time -
9. Immaculate appearance
10. Excellent communications