

Report of	Meeting	Date
Director Customer and Digital (Introduced by Cabinet Member (Communities, Social Justice and Wealth Building))	Cabinet	Wednesday, 18 January 2023

Customer Access Charter

Is this report confidential?	No
Is this decision key?	No
Savings or expenditure amounting to greater than £100,000	Significant impact on 2 or more council wards

Purpose of the Report

- For Cabinet to consider the Customer Access Charter and Feedback Policy.

Recommendations

- To approve the Customer Access Charter including:
 - Customer access standards
 - Feedback policy
 - Improvements to general online contact and customer processes
 - Uniforms
 - Performance measures

Reasons for recommendations

- To ensure that we continue to deliver an excellent standard of customer care in line with the model agreed by both councils as part of the shared Customer Services.

Other options considered and rejected

- To not approve the proposed Charter and associated recommendations. This option is not recommended as it would prevent the delivery of a clear customer services approach across the shared service and wider organisation.

Executive summary

- This report provides an overview of the proposed Customer Access Charter, which presents the principles and standards for customer access across the organisation.

6. The report includes:

- customer services principles
- customer care standards
- improvements to current customer access
- proposed uniforms
- proposed changes to processes to ensure that customers can access specialist services at the first point of contact
- a refreshed Feedback Policy.

Corporate priorities

7. The report relates to the following corporate priorities:

An exemplary council	Thriving communities
A fair local economy that works for everyone	Good homes, green spaces, healthy places

Background to the report

8. The Customer Access Charter sets out how customers can get in contact with and access the council and the standards of customer care that can be expected across the organisation.
9. The Charter has been developed in relation to the new shared Customer Service model, which was agreed by members in 2021 as part of the shared services proposals, and sets out how the council will deliver an excellent customer service which meets the needs of our customers.
10. The Charter is supplemented by a Feedback Policy which sets out the councils' approach to complaints, compliments and other forms of feedback, as a key mechanism within the councils' approach to customer service. This has been refreshed to reflect audit review findings for the previous customer complaint processes.
11. The full Charter is available at appendix A, with the Feedback Policy at appendix B.

Principles

12. The Customer Access Charter has been developed in relation to the following vision and principles which were agreed as part of the shared Customer Services model and service review in 2021. This vision takes into account best practice from other local authorities and the private sector, the shift in customer expectations and practice as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the efficiencies of automated and digitised services which can be re-invested back into the service to offer an even better customer experience.

Vision and priorities

When customers access our services, they will be modern and easy to interact with. Internally, we will have clear processes that are digitised where possible and make effective use of technology to help improve consistency.

Successful implementation will increase operational efficiency, support digital take up, promote the green agenda through sustainable business processes and, most importantly, maximise customer satisfaction.

What does the future look like?

- A consistent experience across any channel or access point

For example, a customer could complete a process or report an issue from home or with a customer service advisor in the council office, helping to transfer and build confidence in digital skills – both would work in the same way.

- End to end visibility of processes

Once a report or issue has been submitted, both customers and customer advisors will be able to see where the query is up to in the process with clear communication at each point, helping to manage expectations.

- Digitised postal services

Incoming mail will transition to more convenient communication channels but where its received, coupled with statutory correspondence will be managed through a virtual mailroom service. This will increase efficiency, improve data protection, and ensure service are resilient.

- Best use of technology to improve decision making

Customer service officers will be supported by digital automation because recent software developments mean that much of the decision making that would previously have meant a break or delay in the process, is now integrated into a single workflow resulting in quicker response times.

- Effective use of information to help ensure customer services excellence

The service will have improved access to information and data to support decision making and plan services to meet demand and customer expectations. Customer Services will have a proactive approach and use the information that is available to help continually improve services.

- Customer resolutions at the first point of contact

Customer contacts will be resolved at the first point of contact wherever possible and customers will have direct access to specialists who will be able to handle resolutions quickly and effectively. Complicated processes and hand overs will be minimised to ensure a streamlined service which provides the best possible experience for the customer.

This means that the shared model aims to deliver services at the first point of contact wherever possible, with staff enabled to work across all channels in relation to customer needs. The majority of customer contracts will be resolved in tier 1, with only more specialist service requests being passed to tier 2 or 3:

Tier 1: When customers contact the councils through a range of channels, all staff will be able to support customers with accessing information and services through the council website.

- All contact channels with priority focus on assisted face to face contact
- Fully automated and delivered through digital services
- Resolved at the first point of contact

Tier 2: Passed directly to a specialist customer services advisor. Customers should be able to speak to a specialist and have their contact resolved quickly and effectively.

- All contact channels
- Fully automated and delivered through digital services
- Resolved at the first point of contact

Tier 3: Specialist contact relating to back-office functions outside of customer services will be passed on to duty officers in 'one-step.' Whilst this type of contact is less frequent, it is still important that a specialist is available to support customers and provide excellent customer services.

- All contact channels
- Fully automated and delivered through digital services

Customer Care Standards

13. It is proposed that customer care standards are aligned across the councils in order to ensure that officers across Chorley and South Ribble can work effectively across both councils following a shared customer services approach.
14. The Customer Access Charter sets out the expectations that customers can have of the council in terms of customer service, process and timescales, and accessibility when they contact the council through a range of different methods. It also establishes how customers can help us to continue in delivering an excellent customer experience.
15. The customer care standards outlined within this document apply to all officers from across the organisation so that any customer who is contacting the council receives a consistent experience with high standards of customer service. The standards will be reinforced through operational procedures for staff to ensure a consistent process which enables an excellent customer experience with every contact. This will be delivered alongside engagement and training to be carried out upon the implementation of the policy and to new members of staff through the Corporate Induction.
16. The full charter is available in appendix A with specific areas for consideration highlighted below:

Supporting self- service

17. The Customer Charter reflects the benefits of self-service to both customers and the council and encourages customers to access automated services digitally through the councils' websites where possible. This will help to enable capacity across the council to be focused on customer contacts which require greater face-to-face or telephone support including for complex cases.
18. The service will continue to invest in the development of digital services to help ensure that these are easy and accessible to use for both our staff and customers, and will ensure that up to date customer contact details, including email address and phone number, are captured and recorded at every opportunity.

Appointments and visiting service

19. Whilst self-service will be encouraged for customers, there are some cases where a face-to-face appointment is required, including for complex cases, and depending on customer needs and preferences. Appointments are available for all customers who need to visit the council in person and customers will be encouraged to book an appointment prior to visiting to ensure that an officer is available to speak to them with minimal waiting times.
20. The council will maintain a visiting service to customers in their own homes in order to help them to complete service requests and applications for more complex services such as Housing Benefits applications. This visiting service will be available via appointment to all customers who need help or are unable to access the service by themselves and are also unable to visit a customer services centre because of factors such as a disability, health- related issues, or caring responsibilities.

Aligning corporate sign off's

21. Corporate sign off's on letters and other forms of correspondence and communication from the council to customers should be standardised across the council and different departments as part of the operational procedures to be followed for customer care. This will help to ensure that communication from the council is presented in a consistently clear manner which is recognisable to customers and meets the high customer service standards that both organisations aims to deliver.

Printed communication

22. One benefit of an assisted self-service approach is that it helps to support the council's Green Agenda and discourages the use of printing and letters wherever possible. However, there will always be a need for some letters to be printed and posted out. Where digital contact is not possible letters should be sent to customers using the council's hybrid mail services and in line with the following printing principles:

- Printed customer communication should be:
 - Mono
 - Single sided or duplex
 - No more than 2 sides

General contacts

23. There is currently a large volume of contact being received through the general council email address (info@southribble.gov.uk) with 1,200 emails being received at each council in a typical month. This can provide a convenient way for customers to contact the council outside of office hours or if they are unable to phone the council for a query that cannot be resolved through the websites.
24. However, due to the large volumes of contact being received in this way, officer resources are required to manually monitor, action and respond to these contacts, which is placing additional and unnecessary demands on the service and also preventing a timely response for customers.
25. It is therefore recommended that the current general contact form and the general council email addresses are removed from the website and replaced with a new enquiry form, which will automate distribution of digital enquiries to the relevant specialist teams. This will also allow for the form to collect all information required to process the relevant enquiry and will prevent the need for officers to re-contact customers to request additional information or make further clarifications.
26. It is also proposed that when a customer sends an enquiry to the general council email addresses that an automated response is sent to explain the inbox is no longer active and to provide a link to the new enquiry form.
27. This change will mean that contacts are logged and automatically allocated to the right service area or directly into the relevant document management systems resulting in a more responsive service for customers.

Member Contact

28. Members will continue be able to get into contact with specialist services areas or submit service requests or enquiries on behalf of customers through the contact centre. As Members often escalate important issues from our customers, it is recommended that a process for coordinating and responding to member enquiries is established, alongside technology to facilitate and manage service requests for members. This will help to ensure that members who contact Customer Services receive responses and resolutions in a timely manner, providing clearer communication and allowing feedback and updates to be shared with residents more easily.

Uniforms

29. It is recommended that staff across the shared Customer Services should be provided with a uniform to help customers to identify staff within the customer services front office and to present a consistently smart and recognisable identity for each council's customer service base.
30. It is proposed that uniforms would be plain, with a different colour tie/ scarf for each council to maintain the separate identity of each council within the shared service.
31. Examples of the proposed uniform are available via the links below, and it is proposed that the council would provide grey shirts/ blouses, black jackets, and coloured council ties/ scarves, alongside an allowance for trousers.

[Women's Slash Neck Blouse, Pale Grey](#)

[Women's Wrap Front Blouse, Pale Grey](#)

[Men's Long Sleeve Shirt, Mid Grey](#)

[Men's Short Sleeve Shirt, Mid Grey](#)

[Men's Printable Softshell](#)

[Ladies Chiffon Scarf](#)

[Horizontal Ribbed Polyester Ties](#)

[Women's Printable Softshell](#)

[One Button Jacket, Black Twill](#)

32. The total costs of this for staff across both councils would be £4,525, or £2,262 per council, with funding available within current service budgets.

Directing specialist customer contacts

33. Current services and council processes do not always enable access to specialist services at the first point of contact as outlined in the vision and principles for shared customer services. The following changes have been considered to help facilitate this and to align processes across both councils in line with the shared services model.

Handovers and processes

34. A review of key customer facing processes has been carried out to identify areas which may need to be reviewed to align the role of customer services across both councils and in line with the principles developed for the shared customer services model. The full list of processes and recommendations is available at appendix C and highlights customer

facing processes which could be completed by specialists in the back office or digitised to reduce handovers and duplicated work whilst having a minimal impact on service area staff.

35. If contacts for specialist services are directed to service areas or digitised, officers will be able to speak to customers and provide access to specialist services at the first point of contact in line with the shared services model. This will help to reduce the volume of calls managed by the customer contact centre and manage issues such as call-backs, whilst ensuring that customers receive a resolution at the first point of contact.

36. This review has also aimed to align processes across councils, ensuring consistency for customer services staff.

37. The proposed changes for South Ribble include:

- To explore whether DBS applications for licensing should be provided through an external provider to streamline applications and reduce officer time.
- For the outcome of Knowledge tests to be uploaded and advised to customers directly by Licensing staff, instead of being passed back to Customer Services to inform the customer. This would reduce handovers and duplication of work.
- For homelessness presentations to be processed by Housing officers instead of by Customer Services, as these take up to 1 hour to complete and relate to a specialist service. This would also 'free-up' resources within customer services to be able to support other customers and reduce wait times.

38. The largest impact on back office staff would be for the South Ribble Housing team, where it is estimated that an additional 0.6 FTE would be required for processing presentations of customers who are homeless/ threatened with homelessness, based on the current time spent on this function by Gateway staff. Other recommendations are expected to have a minimal impact on staff and capacity. It is proposed that arrangements are made between Customer Services and Housing to transfer this staffing budget (through current Customer Services underspends) to meet the additional resources required for the Housing service.

39. It is also recommended that an external provider 'Taxi Plus' is used to process initial DBS applications at South Ribble, as is currently in place at Chorley Council. It is suggested that this solution is explored further by the Customer Services and Licensing teams in line with costs and fees charged for this service. As it currently takes around 45 minutes per enquiry for Gateway staff to process these applications, a move to an external provider would free up capacity and resources for other customer contacts and enquiries.

Issue
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Current processes do not always align with the principles of the shared services operating model, enabling customers to be able to access specialist services at the first point of contact and reducing handovers where possible.

- The processes completed within customer services/ Gateway currently differ across the councils, causing inconsistencies for staff

Recommendation

Key customer facing processes are aligned as outlined in appendix C for Housing and Licensing services. For South Ribble Borough Council this means:

- It is explored whether DBS applications for licensing should be processed through an external provider, Taxi Plus.
- Licensing officers to upload and advise customers on the outcome of knowledge tests directly, instead of handing this over to customer services to get back in contact with customers.
- Homeless presentations to be processed by Housing officers instead of Gateway staff and eviction letters to be processed directly by the Housing Options Assistant in place of the Gateway team.

Duty Officers Process

40. To support the shared services model, the following principles have been proposed to be implemented alongside the Customer Access Policy to ensure cover for customer contacts in front facing areas:

- All customer service contact which could be accessed by customers through self-service or via information available on the council website should continue to be resolved by customer services staff, or other officers across the council, where customers are unable to access this themselves.
- More specialist processing, case work or complex enquiries should be handled by service areas to enable direct access to a service specialist.
- Heads of service will manage availability of staff across the councils in line with the Workplace Strategy, which sets out that staff will be able to work and respond to contact in line with service need.
- For front-facing customer areas, duty officers will be required during opening hours to ensure that customers are able to have their enquiries resolved at the first point of contact. Duty officers will provide access to services covering all types of customer contact, including face-to-face where there is a customer demand for this.
- Service managers will make arrangements for duty officers in line with the requirements and needs of their service for example, on a rota basis. Some services may require more than one duty officer to be available at any one time depending on the level of customer contact and demand.

41. Front-facing services where duty officers will be required have been identified in relation to specialist customer contacts and include:

- Housing
- Planning
- Licensing
- Communities
- Environmental Health
- Waste
- Council Tax
- Revenues and Benefits

42. The Customer Access Policy document will be updated with direct contact information for relevant service areas to provide direct access to specialists where this is most appropriate. Identified duty officers will also be set up on the councils' telephony system to ensure consistency with customer services staff.

Issue
In line with the shared services model, back office services will need to be available to resolve customer contacts relating to specialist or complex areas.
Recommendation
Service managers ensure that office cover is provided to enable customers to access specialist services at the first point of contact.

Opening hours

43. The current opening hours for each council are outlined below. It is not proposed that any changes to current opening hours are made at this time.

Chorley	South Ribble
Phone lines open 8am-6pm Monday- Friday Opening hours- 8.45 am- 5pm	8.30am-5.15pm Monday, Tuesday and Thursday 10.00am-5.15pm Wednesday 8.30am-4.45pm Friday

Weekly hours access	
50	41.75

Monitoring and implementation

44. This paper sets out the vision and goals for Customer Services across Chorley and South Ribble Councils, but there will be a transition period during the implementation and embedding of the new model.
45. The charter will be delivered in practice through customer services staff and all officers across the council who are in contact with customers. This will be embedded through training and engagement for staff once the policies are implemented, all new officers to receive training on customer services as part of the Online Induction, and updated protocols and operational procedures for staff.
46. The success of the Customer Access Charter and Feedback Policy will be reflected through the collection of complaints as outlined in the feedback policy, customer satisfaction surveys that are regularly carried out across both councils, and the council submitting applications for the Customer Excellence Standard which externally assesses customer service against several key criteria and will provide assurance against the quality of customer experience.
47. The ongoing performance of customer service will also be monitored by local indicators, set out below. Whilst the individual councils remain sovereign, it is proposed that the performance measures are aligned across the councils to allow for consistently high operational standards across the service. Both councils have a shared vision for an excellent customer experience, and shared performance targets will help for this to be prioritised equally across the councils.
48. The current performance measures for each council include:

	Current Indicator	Target
Chorley	% of telephone calls answered within 20 seconds	100%
	Abandoned rate	10%
South Ribble	% of telephone calls answered within 90 seconds	40%
	Abandoned rate	15%

49. It is proposed that the abandoned call rate is removed as a local indicator, based on feedback from the Shared Services Joint Committee which highlighted that this is not always a useful measure due to the variety of reasons that a call is abandoned, including customers deciding to use the council website instead of remaining in a call queue.

50. The targets for the new measures will be staged over a 3 year period to allow for the improvement and development of the service as the new customer access charter is implemented, alongside digital improvements to customer services.

	Indicator	New Target 23/24	24/25	25/26
Chorley	% of customers satisfied with the service they received	60%	70%	80%
	Average wait time < 5 minutes	40%	55%	70%
South Ribble	% of customers satisfied with the service they received	60%	70%	80%
	Average wait time <5 minutes	40%	55%	70%

51. The following actions will also be delivered in order to develop and implement the aligned processes:

- Establish operational procedures in line with the aligned policy and provide training for all officers on the new processes.
- Establish a new process for the coordination and response to member enquiries.
- Implement an improved online form solution to the current general enquiry contact.
- Identify and establish duty officers for key service areas, engaging with service areas to embed the new model for delivery.
- Review direct dials and contact information available to customers to provide direct access to specialist services.

Feedback Policy

52. The Feedback Policy works alongside the Customer Access Charter to set out the proposed approach to complaints, compliments and other forms of feedback taking into account best practice and the findings of internal audit recommendations.

53. The policy aims to set out a clear framework for dealing with complaints including key responsibilities and time frames allocated. The policy is set out clearly so that it can be followed easily by customers and officers and includes processes for recording and monitoring feedback so that it can be used to review and improve services across the council.

Process

54. The process will follow these stages:

Informal Stage

Resolving any simple complaints (e.g. missed bins) at point of contact to reduce the use of formal complaint process and provide solutions for customers quickly.

Stage One: Investigation

The complaint is documented centrally and referred to the relevant officer for investigation. The findings and any solution are communicated to the customer within 10 working days.

Stage Two: Senior Management

If a customer is dissatisfied with the outcome of stage one, the complaint will progress to stage two which will see the complaint considered by the relevant head of service or director. A response will be provided within 10 working days of receipt and will be the final response from the Council.

55. Key changes from the current policies for each council and the new feedback policy are outlined below:

	<i>South Ribble</i>	<i>Chorley</i>	<i>Proposed</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
Stages of process	<p>Stage 1- Team Leader/ Manager</p> <p>Stage 2- Manager/ Director</p>	<p>Stage 1- Service Lead/ Manager</p> <p>Stage 2- Chief Executive</p>	<p>Stage 1- Team Leader/ Manager</p> <p>Stage 2- Head of Service/ SMT</p>	<p>The middle ground between the approaches of each council has been taken to ensure that complaints are only escalated to the Chief Executive where required. More serious complaints will be escalated straight to the Chief Executive to ensure a quick solution.</p>
Timescales	<p>Acknowledge within 3 working days</p> <p>Stage 1 to be responded to in 10 working days.</p> <p>Stage 2 to be responded to in 20 working days</p>	<p>Acknowledge within 5 working days</p> <p>Stage 1 to be responded to in 10 working days.</p> <p>Stage 2 to be responded to in 10 working days</p>	<p>Acknowledge within 3 working days</p> <p>Stage 1 to be responded to in 10 working days.</p> <p>Stage 2 to be responded to in 10 working days.</p>	<p>Timescales for responding to customers have been shortened wherever possible to ensure quick resolution of complaints whilst still maintaining realistic timeframes</p>
Approach to compliments and general feedback	<p>Feedback policy in place</p>	<p>No specific approach to general feedback</p>	<p>All forms of feedback including complaints and compliments considered in the policy</p>	<p>The policy includes a clear process for all types of feedback to ensure that we are able to learn from not only formal complaints but compliments and also general feedback which has not progressed to a formal complaint.</p>

Climate change and air quality

56. The work noted in this report does not impact the climate change and sustainability targets of the Councils Green Agenda and all environmental considerations are in place.

Equality and diversity

57. The Integrated Impact Assessment identifies no negative impacts on customers. The proposed Charter and customer care standards should make it easier for all customers to access council services.

Risk

58. The main risk for the proposals is disruption to service delivery whilst changes are being implemented. Full staff engagement and training will be carried out to ensure that any impact is minimised.

Comments of the Statutory Finance Officer

59. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Clearly the improvements to the way we deal with customers, and use the technology and systems available to us, will enable the council to make the best use of resources.

Comments of the Monitoring Officer

60. There are no concerns from a Monitoring Officer perspective with this report.

Appendices

Appendix A- Customer Access Charter

Appendix B- Feedback Policy

Appendix C- Duty Officer Processes

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