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Joint OSC 150413

Item 7

Customer Services Strategy



Copeland Borough Council 2012-15

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Introduction

Welcome to Copeland Borough Council's Customer Service Strategy. This document outlines our commitment to excellent customer services.

Local government is currently going through some of the most significant changes it has ever seen. Councils across the country are changing what they do and have to focus on providing a smaller range of services, which must be focussed on the customer.

Copeland is no different.

We know that by 2015, we will be providing fewer services. However, our aim is to ensure that the services we do provide are those that our customers most need and that these services are easy to access.

Copeland, like so many other places, is already seeing changes to services, central government budget and welfare cuts, squeezed household incomes and much more. We are committed to trying to minimise the impact of the changes on residents and local communities where we can.

With that in mind, we have produced this strategy. This document outlines our approach to customer services, and details how we will ensure that our services meet customer needs in changing times.

We know that as services change and adapt, there will be a greater demand on our customer service functions and our approach to working with others across Copeland will also change and adapt to help meet the challenges in the years ahead.

Our aim is to ensure that these changes are not a barrier to our customers accessing the services they need. This strategy outlines our commitment to this, and how we will do it and deliver our customer service vision:

A customer focussed organisation providing a quality experience which places the customer at the heart of everything we do.

Councillor Elaine Woodburn,
Leader of Copeland Borough Council

Paul Walker,
Chief Executive of Copeland Borough Council

Context

This is a time of rapid change for local government. Our Customer Services Strategy has been designed to reflect these changes but also to build upon best practice in the delivery of excellent customer services.

In 2010, significant reductions in public spending were announced. For Copeland Borough Council, this resulted in the need to reduce our budget by 30% over five years in order to meet new financial targets. This has been a significant challenge for us and much has been achieved through our programme of efficiency savings. However, there is still more to do. This, taken together with significant changes in national policy such as changing the way welfare benefits will be delivered and encouraging other agencies, community groups and bodies to provide local public services means we are committed to a radical review of the services we offer and support. A wider programme of change will ensure that all services delivered in future are as cost effective as possible.

As well as facing many of our own challenges, we recognise that these are difficult and uncertain times for many residents and families within our Borough. We recognise that many are being affected by reduced wages; squeezed household incomes; changes to welfare benefits and unemployment. We recognise that we provide a whole range of local services that are essential to providing a good quality of life for those who live and work here and in attracting visitors and inward investment.

This Strategy has been developed to help us:

- Meet the needs of our communities, visitors and businesses
- Ensure we maintain our focus on providing high quality, relevant and easy to access to services across the whole of Copeland
- Meet its financial targets

In this way, the Strategy forms an integral part of our overall policy framework. It supports the delivery of our Corporate Plan and sits alongside our Medium Term Financial Strategy. It is also reflected within our wider change programme.

The document sets out:

- Our customer service priorities
- Our approach to managing telephone, web, face to face contact and postal communications
- Our approach to accessibility and inclusivity
- Our approach to customer care

Our Customer Services priorities

Our overarching priorities are set out within the Council's Corporate Plan. Within this, there is a commitment to being a high performing organisation, centred on the needs of customers.

Our overarching aim, guiding the development of this Strategy is to be:

"A customer focused organisation providing a quality experience which places the customer at the heart of everything we do"

In this way, this Strategy covers the whole of the organisation; every member of staff, every Elected Member and every service we provide. We recognise that in such turbulent times this is a challenging vision to deliver but we are committed to doing just that. We will support the delivery of this Strategy with appropriate investment in: the design of services; technology; customer service locations; and our staff. Taken together these four elements are key ingredients for success.

Over the term of this Strategy, we will:

- Make it simple for you to contact us using your choice of phone, face to face or web
- Make it easy for you to use our services using your choice of phone, face to face or web
- Ensure that we can help you to access the full range of services available in Copeland, not just the ones we provide
- Ensure that you know what service standards to expect and how to raise concerns if these are not met
- Ask for your feedback and act on it whenever and wherever we can

We also recognise that we are not the only provider of services within Copeland. We value working in partnership with others to deliver services, attract inward investment and represent the needs of Copeland, because where this works well it is beneficial to customers. However we know that it can be confusing when you have to deal with a number of separate agencies and we will look to improve this by making sure that when you contact us we will help you. We also recognise that reductions in funding are impacting on a full range of public services within Copeland and we are fully committed to working to reduce this impact wherever possible.

Over the term of this Strategy, we will:

- Represent the needs of Copeland in regional and national decision-making
- Arrange services for those most in need
- Actively seek out opportunities to work with others
- Ensure our staff have the knowledge to advise you about a wide range of services within Copeland and how you can access them

Our approach to managing the different ways you contact us and how we contact you

There are a number of ways that residents, visitors and businesses can contact us. These primarily include: face to face access at a number of local offices; by phone; a range of payment points throughout the Borough; and via the web. We also receive some contact by email, post and social media. The most popular way to contact us currently is by phone, closely followed by face to face contact. While we recognise the popularity of these contact methods, we also recognise that the development of new technologies is changing the way residents, visitors and businesses want to contact us. When customers contact us they expect the same- if not better- level of online services as they would if they did online banking or shopping.

Over the term of this strategy, we will manage the different ways in which you and others can make contact and do business with us.

This Strategy sets out how we will manage the following access channels:

- Face to face
- Internet
- Telephone (including the use of automated telephony technology)
- Post
- Email

The Strategy focuses on three key types of contact between us and our customers. These are:

- **Transactions** (e.g. reporting a problem or paying a bill)
- **Interactions** (e.g. obtaining advice, public consultations, petitioning)
- **Information** (e.g. leaflets)

In the development of this Strategy, we explicitly recognise that the needs of our customers differ and while one customer may prefer to use the internet at a time and location that suits them, another customer may feel much more comfortable seeing a member of staff to talk through a difficulty or find out about a service. As well as recognising these needs, we also know that other service providers are moving towards a ‘digital by default’ approach (for example, in future welfare benefits will be administered over the internet in the majority of cases) and that where this is done well, internet access is more cost effective for than a phone transaction or face to face contact. However, some residents may need support to fully access services in this way.

Therefore, in future, we will:

- Invest in technology and communications to allow the delivery of self service via the internet and assisted self-service within our face to face locations
- Maintain face to face local offices where there is sufficient demand
- Extend the reach of our services throughout the Borough in ways which are affordable and sustainable
- Improve the experience our customers receive across all three major access channels (face to face, phone and web)
- Evaluate our approach to providing Council services to the business sector.

Our approach to face to face service delivery

We recognise the importance of our face to face service delivery. It is key way in which customers contact us and experience first hand the services we provide. We currently provide face to face services in the following locations: the Copeland Centre in Whitehaven; Cleator Moor Library; and Millom Library. A range of services are also provided directly to customers through our service teams, for example: Environmental Health Officers, Enforcement Officers and Housing Options Officers. To complement our own direct service delivery, we also commission others to provide services on our behalf. More recently we have trialed a rural outreach project and commissioned Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) to provide an advisory service to residents from the Copeland Centre.

Whilst this works well in the majority of cases, our learning from the last year shows that:

- We could improve the customer experience in our face to face environments by increasing the number of service requests that can be resolved at first point of contact, reducing waiting times and increasing privacy levels for customers
- We could release capacity to deal with more complex queries and to support assisted self-service by reducing the number of simple, high volume queries dealt with face to face
- Increasing our presence in more rural parts of the Borough is welcomed but must be affordable and in line with take up
- Collaborating with others will retain its importance in delivering high quality services in future
- Our customers will be affected by the move towards ‘digital by default’ approach of key public services and we will have a role to play in helping customers make that change

Over the term of this Strategy, we will:

- Resource our face to face locations according to customer demand
- Assist those in rural areas to access more easily our services in a way which is appropriate and affordable
- Seek opportunities to share face to face provision with other organisations and design our property portfolio accordingly

- Provide supported access to our website through our face to face staff
- Identify how services might also be provided on the web and quality improvements to our face to face service
- Invest in improving the customer experience in our face to face locations
- Ensure all face to face staff have access to the information, knowledge and technology they need to provide excellent customer service

Our approach to delivering services by phone

Accessing our services by phone is a very popular method for our customers. This reflects the geography of Copeland but also convenience. The vast majority of calls come into the Council via our 0845 number and are resolved within Copeland Direct, our Contact Centre. We still publish direct dial numbers in some instances and because of the way our processes are designed, a proportion of calls cannot be resolved without transferring them to another team within the Council. We recognise that customers can find this frustrating.

Copeland Direct handled approaching 70,000 calls in 2011/12. In most instances the service request was handled satisfactorily. However, we recognise that best practice has moved on since Copeland Direct was introduced in 2003 and our learning from best practice shows:

- That contact centres work best for customers and staff where customer service requests can be resolved by staff within the contact centre
- That contact centres should be seen as an integral part of the organisation, working with teams to help serve customers and keep the cost of service delivery down
- That the processes used by contact centres to serve customers should be regularly reviewed and challenged to make sure they are efficient and effective
- The performance of contact centres should be routinely monitored

Over the term of the Strategy, we will:

- Provide one main number for the organisation which can be easily found so that contacting the Council is straightforward for our residents
- Investigate the costs of introducing a 0300/0345 number making contacting the Council cheaper for those customers using 'pay as you go' mobile phones
- Identify potential opportunities to increase the number of services that we can resolve first time by phone, reducing the need to pass you to other teams within the Council

Our approach to delivering services via the web

The Council like most public agencies, has a website. It is seen as an important tool in sharing information about the Council and our services. Our website is also an important way in which we share information about our Councillors, the meetings they attend and the decisions they make. However, we recognise that our website has been limited in terms of the online services it provides and up until now there has been little use of our online forms. We have also had feedback to suggest, that for those customers wanting to access Council services online, our website is not meeting their expectations.

We have listened to this feedback and earlier this year we set about a complete rebuild of our website with the aim that our future website will:

- Offer a list of ‘top ten tasks’ for customers to use at a time and location that suits them
- Offer easy to access information about Council Services
- Provide a hosted website for other public agencies within Copeland to use and share information to help provide joined up services
- Be easy to maintain and flexible so we can change it meet your needs easily and cheaply

The rebuild of the Council’s website is being complemented by preparations within service teams to move more services online. Over the term of this Strategy we will:

- Promote our new website to customers as a place to go for information and online services 24/7
- Promote the functionality of our new website to partner organisations to use and integrate with
- Continue to launch more online services based on a thorough understanding of services and customer need
- Seek to provide live webchat facilities as an alternative to the telephone, post and email channels
- Ensure our website is written in plain English and meets accessibility standards
- Integrate, wherever possible, online transactions directly into back office systems to prevent duplication of effort when entering the same information more than once

- Ensure all Council leaflets and literature are available via the website to reduce print costs and environmental impact
- Monitor the take up of online services
- Investigate the costs of making our services available using smart phone technology

Of course we recognise that ‘new media’ is emerging all of the time. We also recognise that many customers have already made the move to using websites on the go through their smart phones. Over the term of the Strategy we will:

- Investigate ways to make our services accessible using smart phone technology
- Review our use of social networking and social media sites
- Investigate the use of text services e.g. outbound text facilities to confirm appointments
- Develop live web chat as an alternative to the phone, post and email channels.

Our approach to postal communication

Despite the popularity of face to face and phone contact, we still receive a significant amount of post. In some instances, this is the most appropriate way for a customer to contact us but in other instances there may be other more convenient and cost effective ways for them to contact us. Our ambition over the term of this Strategy is to reduce the amount of post and paper communication we receive.

Over the term of this Strategy we will:

- Conduct a systematic review of all post and paper communications received by the Council over a defined period of time. We will look for areas where post may be reduced
- Create a range of online forms in order to provide customers with a credible alternative to post
- Place our leaflets, information and forms online in order to reduce the amount of printed material which is sent out and subsequently returned
- Use second class post as our main postal tariff to minimise costs
- Provide assisted self-service through our contact centres to enable customers to use our online options
- Investigate the use of mobile technology for our peripatetic staff to reduce the use of printed forms and requirement for the customer to return via post

Aspects of this approach will also be extended to help us handle the amount and appropriateness of **email communication** received.

Our approach to accessibility and inclusivity

We recognise that our residents, visitors and businesses have different needs. These include a requirement for a range of different services to be provided locally and in a range of different ways. In April this year, we published its first Single Equality Scheme. This built upon its previous achievements in this area, having successfully being awarded the Achieving Standard of the Equality Framework in November 2010. The Scheme set out a number of objectives for the Council to work towards meeting over the next two years.

These included, for example:

- Conduct a Community needs analysis
- Increase participation with Stakeholder groups
- Renew and refresh our approach to customer care and training
- Enhance and develop our Website
- Enhance seamless service delivery through partnership working

We recognise how important it is to reach out and understand the different needs of our customers and to reflect those in service design and provision. Much of the work we do in this area is developed in partnership with other organisations and agencies throughout the Borough. In developing our website, we hope that this will become an important way in which customers' access information and services provided by us and others. We are designing the website in such a way that it promotes accessibility and choice. However, we recognise that not all parts of the Borough have access to broadband or have ready access to computers. We will therefore remain committed to providing face to face and phone access alongside our website channel.

Our ambition is to ensure we provide services which are accessible to our communities in a way which is affordable and appropriate. We will seek to develop a number of complementary ways to access services.

Over the term of the Strategy, we will:

- Continue to engage with groups representing those with specific requirements for contacting us and using our services
- Carry out an Equality Impact assessment on our approach to contact management and make adjustments where appropriate
- Ensure that we widely advertise the different ways we can be contacted
- Provide support for those with different language requirements to access our services
- Ensure that our new website is designed to meet access standards

- Provide assisted self-service to our website through the our contact centre and over time, through live ‘web chat’
- Investigate the potential to deliver services through kiosks in partnership with other organisations and agencies across the Borough

Our approach to Customer Care

For some time the Council has monitored the performance of its contact centre and individual service teams have monitored the performance of their services, through for example, surveys and other customer feedback mechanisms. More recently, we have started to monitor customer satisfaction with our face to face interactions in our local offices. We are now also set to introduce customer satisfaction monitoring for our phone interactions. We also have a Corporate Complaints, Comments and Compliments Process and receive a Local Government Ombudsman Report every year. We have recently reviewed this process, designing something which we hope, will be simpler and easier to use. Our Customer Relations Officer, will, wherever possible, seek to resolve the complaint as soon as possible. In this way, our Customer Relations Officer will be empowered to resolve difficulties with the customer and will be able to monitor complaints as they arrive within the Council which will help us in spotting trends or problems that require a more detailed review in order to put them right for customers. We are due to launch our new process by the end of this year.

Looking forward, we are committed to developing our approach to customer care.

Over the term of this Strategy, we will:

- Launch the new Corporate Complaints, Comments and Compliments process and monitor it
- Ensure that each service has a recognised set of service standards which are published and promoted
- Monitor customer satisfaction with our services in a way which is appropriate and affordable
- Seek customers' views whenever we propose significant changes to services and ensure these are reflected in decision-making and service re-design
- Monitor the take-up of our services
- Work with service users and representative organisations to ensure that our services are appropriate and accessible for all customers
- Ensure our interactions with vulnerable groups are appropriate and in accordance with our statutory obligations
- Keep personal data secure

Delivery this Strategy

This Strategy is a key element of our Corporate Policy Framework. The next step in this process is to design an action plan for each year of the Strategy. The two documents taken together will be owned by the Corporate Leadership Team and progress will be reported on a regular basis to the Executive. This will include a discreet number of performance measures.

We will regular review the content and direction of the Strategy, making sure that it meets resident's needs. This will include working with a number of our representative groups and partners to make sure we are getting this right.