

# CUSTOMER FIRST

## A Customer Service Strategy for Welwyn Hatfield, 2018-2021

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### INTRODUCTION

Everything we do at Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council is about providing the best possible services to our customers.

This is why our new Customer Services Strategy is called *Customer First*. The strategy is for everyone, including council staff and elected Members, as well as partners, residents and businesses.

Customer expectations are rightly increasing. Our customers expect to be able to access services in a modern way, using the technology they want to use – either from the comfort of their own home, or when on the move, 24 hours a day.

As a provider of public services we must also be mindful that many of our customers are vulnerable and need support. It is important that our customers can still rely on us to provide services in the traditional way, if that is their preference.

### **It's all about customer service.**

Our customers expect services to be reliable, with as many requests for service as possible being dealt with at the first point of contact.

Our customers are not just the people who come to the council to ask for a service. They include everyone we work with, our employees, partner organisations, local businesses and the contractors who deliver services on the council's behalf.

We value the wide diversity of our communities. We will always consider this when providing services to the public, working with partners and in our role as an employer.

Although as a local authority we are facing many challenges this is an exciting time at Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council. We have a new Executive Team in place and the housing service recently reintegrated back into the council, bringing together more than 500 employees committed to doing the very best for our customers.

Council teams and Members are really excited about driving forward improvement across all services.

Our **Customer First** strategy sets out our framework for how we intend to achieve our ambitions for delivering customer service excellence over the next three years and beyond.

Councillor Bernard Sarson Executive Member, Business, Partnerships and Public Health
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Simone Chinman Russell Executive Director, Housing and Communities
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## BACKGROUND – ABOUT OUR COUNCIL

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council provides services to 122,000 people who live in the borough and the many more who work and study here. The council has more than 500 employees and indirectly provides employment opportunities for the many contractors who provide services on the council's behalf.

We are passionate about delivering excellent, inclusive services within our borough and this is supported by our corporate vision, values and business objectives.

### 1.1.1 Our Vision

To make Welwyn Hatfield a great place to live, work and study with a vibrant, growing economy.

### 1.1.2 Our Values

Our values demonstrate what is important to us in our dealings with residents, businesses, partners and employees.

Our values are:

*Integrity:* We will be honest, clear and consistent about what we do

*Transparency:* We will be approachable, accountable and transparent in the way we communicate and conduct our business

*Respect:* We will have respect for residents, businesses, partners and employees

*Fairness:* We will be fair in our policies and decision making, listening to the views and feedback we receive

### Our corporate priorities

Our vision is achieved by working with our partners, businesses and residents towards our five key priorities.

#### 1. *Maintain a safe and healthy community*

Work with partners to keep people safe

Help improve and maintain the health and wellbeing of residents

Provide for a wide variety of leisure covering arts, culture, fitness and sport

2. *Protect and enhance the environment*

Keep our streets clean and work with residents to reduce litter

Improve recycling rates and reduce the amount of waste going to landfill

Maintain and improve our green spaces

Deliver effective parking services

3. *Meet the borough's housing needs*

Plan for the housing needs of our communities

Increase the supply of new, affordable homes

Effectively manage the borough's housing stock

Allow for sustainable growth that protects our environment and heritage

4. *Help build a strong local economy*

Promote the borough as an attractive place in which to invest

Revitalise our town centres and other shopping areas

5. *Engage with our communities and provide value for money*

Deliver value for money

Provide outstanding customer service

Ensure fair and open access for our diverse communities

Effectively communicate what we do

## **CUSTOMER FIRST – OUR JOURNEY SO FAR**

Following the council's decision to bring the housing service back into the corporate management structure, a new joint customer services steering group was created with the aim of developing one strategy for all council services. The purpose of this was to make sure customers had the same experience, regardless of which service they are requesting, and also to help bring together council teams into one single customer services framework.

The **Customer First Steering Group** is chaired by the council's Executive Director, Housing and Communities. There is an Executive Cabinet Member on the Group, along with many Heads of Services and the other Executive Directors.

The first task for the Steering Group was to identify the current position of the council, assessing how well customer service is being delivered and how consistent the approach is to customers through different service areas.

The council's starting point was then measured against the six principles for **Customer First** (as outlined in this document) and a delivery plan was formulated to record the actions required to achieve the desired outcomes.

This strategy explains what our operating principles are and summarises the actions we will be taking to achieve the high standards we have set for ourselves.

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## Our six principles for customer service

The Welwyn Hatfield approach to **Customer First** is guided by six key principles. These were agreed following consultation with residents, Members and employees.

1. **Be customer focussed** – understand who our customers are, acting on what they tell us, so they are at the heart of our services
  2. **Be clear** – ensure that our customers know what they can expect from us, and that our teams are clear about the quality of service they must deliver
  3. **Be accessible** – make it easier for all of our customers to contact us and do business with us by offering a wide range of customer service options
  4. **Be efficient** – make the best use of our resources and new technology, delivering value for money without sacrificing quality
  5. **Be reliable** – get it right first time, serving customers consistently in a single transaction wherever possible
  6. **Be transparent** – be open about how we perform and the services our customers receive.
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### Principle 1 – Be customer focussed

**Understand who our customers are, acting on what they tell us so they are at the heart of our services.**

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This first principle lies at the heart of our **Customer First** approach and is all about understanding our customers.

We want to give all our customers the opportunity to benefit from what we can offer and we will promote equality of opportunity for everyone affected by our activities.

Therefore a key part of our Customer Services Strategy is to put in place a clear framework for managing **customer insight** across the council so that we can learn more about our customers and their preferences.

Customer insight will tell us:

- Who our customers are
- What our customers think about our services
- How we can plan and improve our services based on what we know about our customers

**The more customer insight we have, the greater will be our chance of delivering services which are truly shaped around our customers.**

To help us become more customer focused we will:

- **Create a new customer insight framework which all council services will be part of**

This will provide a clear approach for collecting feedback from our customers and managing it effectively.

Findings and learning will be shared internally and externally to help us improve our services.

- **Develop continuous improvement plans based around customer demand and feedback**

- **Review the way we manage customer complaints**

We will do this in consultation with service users and we will launch an updated complaints policy and process.

We will publish reports on the types of complaints made to the council and communicate how we have improved our services as a result of the complaints we receive.

- **We will at all times make sure that the information we collect about our customers and the way it is managed complies with the General Data Protection Regulations 2018**

We will not collect information from our customers unless we intend to use it to improve the way we deliver services.

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## **Principle 2 – Be clear**

**Ensure that our customers know what they can expect from us, and that our employees are clear about the quality of service they must deliver**

**We want our customers to know what they can expect from the council before they contact us to request a service.**

We believe that if customers know what they should expect, they will be more empowered during their transactions with the council. It will help ensure that the obligations of the council and the customer are clear to everyone.

To help us be clear with our customers we will:

- Carry out a full review of the council's current Customer Service Standards and update them where required, ensuring they are aligned to our vision, values, and business objectives
- Develop service-specific delivery standards to reflect a specific process or statutory obligation
- Ask customers for their feedback on the proposed new Service Standards and keep customers informed on how well we are performing against them
- Provide employees, Members and other relevant partners, such as contractors, with appropriate training so that they understand the Service Standards
- Publish the Service Standards in a clear and accessible way
- Develop a framework for reviewing the Service Standards so that they remain up to date

### **Principle 3 – Be accessible**

#### **Make it easier for all of our customers to contact us, and do business with us, by offering a wide range of customer service options**

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No matter how people choose to contact us, they should receive the same high level of customer service.

Many of our customers rely on the traditional methods of contact, such as telephone and visiting our reception. However, increasingly more people prefer to access services online.

We have consulted with our customers to understand more about their attitudes to requesting council services online. A high proportion of customers told us they would be happy to use online services. This reflects national trends.

To help us ensure our services are **accessible** we will.

- **Identify which of our services are not currently available digitally and develop an action plan to enable, where practical, online access to all council services, including on mobile devices**
- **Review the council website to ensure access to information online meets customers' needs and expectations. Our aim is to develop a new website with improved design and information architecture, and we will streamline our online content making it easier for customers to find the information they are looking for.**
- **Develop an online customer portal where our customers can access all the services they need.**
- **Respond to the ever-increasing use of social media by extending our use of these platforms so they become another channel through which customers can request services**

We will review our existing Twitter and Facebook profiles to become new channels of customer service contact.

We will continue to maximise the use of social media to engage with customers, proactively sharing information that will reduce the need for them to contact us. We will publish an updated social media strategy to reflect this.

- **Continue to offer the traditional customer contact options but review these services to make sure they operate within the six principles of *Customer First***

We will review the council's reception service to ensure that the service is customer focused and fit for the purpose of resolving transactions at the first point of contact.

We will review the effectiveness of telephone contact as a customer communication channel, including the use of the council's contact centres and through direct contact with the council's service teams.

## Principle 4 – Be efficient

### Making the best use of our resources and new technology, delivering value for money without sacrificing quality

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We need to make sure that we have the right tools to deliver excellent customer service and that we deliver services in the most efficient way.

The two main resources we have to deliver customer service are our employees and technology. As part of our **Customer First** strategy we will review how our resources are used and work towards getting the best from them.

To help us be more **efficient** in the delivery of our services we will:

- **Review working practices and identify how these can be more flexible and agile, so that staff are able to provide a more personal and responsive service to customers, getting the best use from mobile technology, appropriate to the service they are providing**

Ensure that our actions reflect the approach set out within our evolving Workforce Development Strategy.

- **Develop a new Information Communications Technology and Digital Strategy, aligned with the outcomes we set out in this document, and communicate it in a way that is clear for customers, staff and stakeholders to understand**

Carry out an audit of our IT systems with the aim of reducing the overall number of systems in use, driving further efficiencies where we can in a way that does not impact on the customer.

Provide the right type of devices for employees, offering the best technology solutions for serving our customers.



- Through our review of technology make sure there is a clear and simple flow of information from the customer interface to back office ICT systems. This will not only improve our efficiency but also the service our customers receive, helping to ensure a consistent approach.
- Enhance the council's intranet service, with the option of a dedicated extranet for Members and other stakeholders, placing information more readily at the fingertips of those who need it.

## Principle 5 – Be reliable

### Get it right first time, serving customers consistently in a single transaction wherever possible.

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Being reliable is about delivering a consistent level of service, however people choose to contact us. It also means dealing with customers' requests for service in a single transaction wherever possible.

We recognise that we need to build upon and improve existing methods for customer contact and develop new ones.

We have identified that we can improve the consistency and efficiency of our service delivery by extending the use of a contact centre model to support all council services.

**A standard approach across the council for dealing with customer contact across all channels will provide one first single point of contact for our customers, handling all basic transactions and service requests.**

More complex customer queries will be referred to operational service teams, allowing resources to be allocated where needed most, providing a more efficient and streamlined service.

To help us be more reliable we will:

- **Identify across each of our different service areas how the contact centre model can best meet the needs of customers wishing to use these services**
- **Identify which communication channels/contact methods will be provided for within the contact centre model and how these should be prioritised, based on customer demand**
- **Identify the different customer journeys for each of the services provided by the council and use this information to plan how first point of contact resolution can be best achieved**
- **Identify how we can reduce referrals and escalations through empowering staff to make decisions and embracing innovation, allowing services to naturally improve.**

## Principle 6 – Be transparent

### Be open about how we perform and the services our customers receive.

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It is very important for customers and other stakeholders to be updated on how well we are performing against our corporate Business Plan objectives and how we are working towards improvements where our services are currently not achieving the published standards.

Through our **Customer First** strategy we will:

- **Implement a new performance and risk management framework which clearly links our corporate objectives to the services we deliver within our operational teams**
  - **Regularly refresh our corporate business plan and communicate our objectives widely, publishing how we are performing against these objectives**
  - **Publish the compliments we receive so that employees can be recognised for their achievements and we can learn from what we do well**
  - **Put in place arrangements for employees of the council to be kept regularly updated on how their team contributes to the council's wider corporate objectives**
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#### **Our next steps**

Our **Customer First** strategy is based on an initial three-year delivery plan. This sets out comprehensive actions under each of the six principles. These actions have been summarised in this strategy document.

Actions will be reviewed regularly and an updated delivery plan published in April of each year, so that our **Customer First** journey will always be current and will reflect existing operating conditions and future challenges.

#### **Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA)**

An EqIA will be carried out for each new policy or working practice introduced as a result of the implementation of the Customer Service Strategy.

#### **Employee and customer engagement**

Continued employee and customer engagement is crucial for the success of this strategy.

Our **Customer First** Steering Group will be talking with the council's stakeholders throughout the life of the delivery plan so that every step being planned takes into account the views of the people who deliver our service and our customers who use them.

### **How you can get involved?**

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council will publish updates on the implementation of Customer First and will advertise opportunities to get involved. Please check our website and intranet for updates.

### **Want to know more?**

Our **Customer First Steering Group** are on hand to help. Steering Group Members are:

- Simone Russell, Executive Director (Chair)
- Bernard Sarson, Executive Member, Business, Partnerships and Public Health
- Thom Burn, Policy and Communications Manager (Vice-Chair)
- Ka Ng, Executive Director
- Nick Long, Executive Director
- Colin Haigh, Head of Planning
- David Houghton, IT Client Manager
- Debbie Freeman, Quality Assurance Manager
- Durk Reyner, Head of Environment Services
- Janet Pilbeam, HR Manager
- Lucy Aston, Business Excellence Manager
- Richard Baker, Head of Resources
- Stuart Pearson, Head of Housing Operations
- Sue Kiernan, Customer Services Client Manager
- Paul Underwood, Head of Policy and Culture