

**“Putting our
customers at the heart
of everything we do**

**and providing appropriate support
and assistance to those who need it,
whilst ensuring customer
experiences are easy,
convenient and
effective.”**

Customer Service Strategy

2021-2026



**North
Herts**
Council

Introduction

'People First' is one of the key priorities of the council as set out in the Council Plan, due to be adopted in April 2022.

People make North Herts work. We value all our residents, staff, contractors, councillors, businesses and other partners and place them at the heart of everything we do.

This strategy applies across the whole council, including our staff, councillors and contractors delivering services on our behalf. To ensure a consistent approach, we have updated our Customer Care Standards (Appendix A) and defined our Operating Model below:

When you contact us, we will be easy to deal with. This means we will:



find somebody that can resolve your query if the first person you speak to is unable to, or put you in contact with the right people if it is not a council matter



take responsibility for your enquiry and ensure effective internal communications between service areas



respond to you quickly and courteously, regardless of how you contact us



make it as easy as possible to access our services, at a time and in a way that is most convenient to you



design our processes with all our customers in mind and make them as user friendly as possible



make services digital by default, whilst making sure that customers who do not use digital services can still interact with us through traditional methods, such as telephone and face to face services



provide a consistent level of customer service and treat you with fairness and respect

Listening to customer feedback

Many customer interactions and enquiries are handled by our Customer Service Centre (CSC) as the first point of contact for most council services. This means we have a dedicated team who are constantly in contact with our customers and provide insight into any issues that may be emerging, as well as hearing first-hand the things that are important to our customers.

This valuable insight, along with feedback from our corporate 3C's (Comments, Compliments and Complaints) policy can be used to help identify where we can make improvements or changes if something is not working so well, as well as building on where things are working well.

Key achievements

We have been busy enhancing and developing our customer service operations to ensure we are keeping up to date with the latest technological advances and providing the best service possible to our customers.

Our key technological achievements include:



a new councillor portal for councillors to log and track issues on behalf of their constituents



an implementation of a modern and agile Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system which gives a single view of our customers



installing a modern and future-proof telephony system which enables staff to work from any location



re-branding our existing customer portal to 'MyAccount', where customers can log and track cases as well as registering to view their key Council Tax information



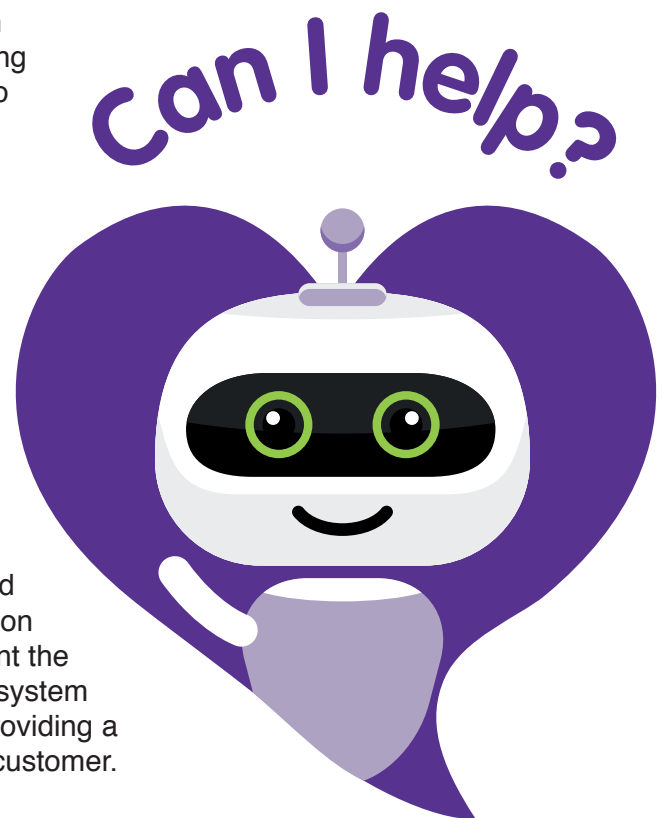
integrating social media into our customer service offering as another channel for our residents to report and enquire, covering both Facebook and Twitter

Looking ahead - our future aims


Building upon these successful foundations, we can now look ahead and focus on our future aims. Moving forward we recognise a growing need for services to be provided quickly, efficiently, and effectively. We also recognise our customers want the best experience every time, all the time.


We want to exceed customer expectations and we will aim to do that whatever the situation. There is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has changed how we operate. In March 2020, almost our entire workforce moved to working from home full time to accommodate the pandemic and the constraints it presented.

We are now moving towards a hybrid way of working and delivering services. We have introduced new customer service channels including a chatbot on our website and online video calls which complement the traditional channels. We also have an appointment system for customers who rely on a face-to-face service, providing a personal service at a time that is convenient to the customer.




In summary, our future aims are to:


 offer alternative and convenient ways to contact us through our customer service centre such as live web chat and online video calls, to compliment traditional channels


 further develop our online services so you can access them whenever you want

 continue to improve all customer journeys so that contacting us and getting the service you expect is as easy as possible

 continually look across the council to identify where Artificial Intelligence and automation can assist service delivery and speed up processing times

 further develop our online MyAccount customer portal so you can access the personalised services that matter to you, all in one secure and convenient place

 enable you to upload documents/proofs to us from your home, without the need to visit us in person










 provide convenient payment facilities, including options to pay with cash in locations closer to home

Our action plan

There are many examples of good customer service and processes that are working well, but we know there is a lot more we can and want to do.

Linked to our corporate priorities of **People First, Sustainability, and Brighter Future Together**, our actions to achieve our aims are set out below.

In 2021/2022, we will:


-  launch this customer service strategy and revised customer service standards in line with the new Council Plan
-  continue to listen to and learn from customer feedback, understanding what is important to our customers and how we can improve the customer experience for all
-  champion positive customer service across the whole organisation
-  start a review of online customer forms to ensure all relevant information is being captured to ensure we can deal with enquiries effectively
-  create a plan to refresh our corporate customer service training approach and ensure that the operating model within this strategy is shared across the council
-  reduce the need for customers to travel to the council offices by providing convenient payment facilities closer to home, and continue to follow our fair collection policy for customers experiencing financial hardship
-  enhance online services where possible, and developing our customer portals including MyAccount and our councillor portal
-  explore new ways in which customers can access our services based on results from our 2021 online services survey
-  continue to encourage customers to self-serve where appropriate and use digital communications instead of paper wherever possible

Between 2022-2026, we will:

-  work together and support each other across the council to deliver a consistent customer experience
-  review customer journeys across all channels to see if they can be further improved
-  continue the work of the Transformation team to develop new innovative ideas to enhance efficiency and accessibility
-  explore and understand how artificial intelligence can support corporate customer service delivery to create further efficiencies
-  be positive and proactive in all correspondence, being strong ambassadors and customer service advocates regardless of how customers contact us
-  engage more with customers on our social media platforms and explore whether targeted social media posts help to reduce contact, and investigate sending regular text messages/emails to promote online services
-  review customer contact points that are not currently channelled through the Customer Service Centre if appropriate to do so, with a view to streamlining and enhancing service delivery effectiveness
-  provide our staff with appropriate support and resources to carry out their roles effectively
-  make sure that our services are accessible for all and that nobody is left behind as we implement more digital solutions
-  recognise where extra support is needed and ensure support is given throughout

Measuring Success

It is our ambition for our internal and external customers, councillors, and contractors to all have a seamless, high quality interaction whenever they contact the council. By continuing to work on our future service provisions and by linking our strategy to other internal strategies and priorities, we expect to achieve the following:

-  an increase in digital contact and transactions with the council
-  consequently, we may see a reduction in telephone contact as more can be done online
-  a more convenient and personalised face to face service through the use of our new appointment booking system
-  an increase in the number of 'MyAccount' sign ups, as the number of personalised services available through the portal increases
-  maintaining high average CSC internal quality monitoring scores of above 93% and a potential increase in the number of 3C's compliments, indicating staff continue to carry out their roles effectively
-  an increase in customer contact methods, following successful trials of new channels
-  a more convenient and efficient way for customers to submit supporting documents to us, which in turn, requires less manual processing for staff
-  an increase in online payments or cash payments made through various alternative locations
-  the ability for some Council Tax processes to be fully automated from the point of first customer contact through to completion of the process, which will be more convenient to customers and increase productivity

This strategy has outlined our key aims and objectives we want to work towards between 2021-2026, whilst putting '**People First**'. We recognise that things can change very quickly, therefore we will review the strategy halfway through the five-year period and adapt it if needed. By putting our customers at the heart of everything we do, we are determined to enable our customers to get the service they require from the council in an easy, convenient, and effective way. We will continually monitor performance and achievements in order to update the service action plan on an annual basis.