

# **Swale Borough Council**

## **Customer Access Channel Strategy 2016-2019**

***Ensuring easy, clear and convenient  
access to Swale's services, information  
and communications***

**October 2015**

**Version 0.1**

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## Introduction

This strategy sets out clear guidelines for staff, elected members and our customers showing how we aim to provide excellent customer service. It also clarifies what customers can expect of us when accessing any of the Council's services we provide for them, irrespective of the method of communication used

Swale Borough Councils purpose is *Making Swale a better place*, of which the provision of excellent customer care is very important to us.

This strategy therefore demonstrates our commitment to providing a variety of ways in which our customers will be able to access information and our services and focusing on understanding our customers' needs in order to deliver outcomes that matter to them.

The current revision of this strategy brings into play recent advances in technology and specifically customer preferences in terms of doing business with all service providers, including Swale Borough Council. Customers are embracing new technologies more than ever before. The internet is used widely, not just through personal computers but mobile devices also, generating more demand of online and easier to access services, when the customer needs it, not centred on office opening hours.

As well as the emergence of different channels, customers are now contacting the Council through different means, often social media such as Facebook and Twitter and this is recognised by the Council, though

It is widely recognised that local authorities need to continue to enhance service transformation to endeavour to provide better services and better value for money. Many customers now turn to the web and automated services as their first port of call for any public service, such as car tax renewals, and Swale needs to meet this challenge by building services which reflect this change in society and customer expectations.

We will therefore seek to change the way we deliver services through new ways of working supported by the use of technology. Technology is transforming the way people carry out their day-to-day activities and, although there will continue to be a role for more traditional methods of service deliver, we want to be at the forefront of change to ensure we meet the expectations of our communities. To do this we will work towards 'channel shift' with the aim of 'all of our business that can be done digitally, will be done digitally'

At the heart of digital delivery is the council website, now accessed more than ever, and often from a mobile device. Digital delivery of services has moved from being desirable, to being essential.

Whilst we seek to 'channel shift'; by making more of our services more accessible through self-service means, for economic and efficiency drivers, we fully

acknowledge that not all of our customers are able to access such channels and we will ensure that there will still be face to face and telephone access to services for these customers.

This strategy also reflects the increased partnership activities undertaken by the Council, including the Sheppey Gateway and Mid Kent Improvement Partnership (MKIP) activity.

Key to this is the successful MKIP Transformation Challenge Awards (TCA) bid, which has provided the funding to put in place the necessary ICT infrastructure to deliver more on-line services through a variety of different channels, to meet with customer preferences.

The Council is committed to better understanding the needs of our customers and to ensure that we tailor the provision of our services and information to best meet these needs. This will be achieved through greater use of customer profiling data, more robust and informed customer feedback and learning from the complaints and compliments we receive from our customers.

This strategy supports the Corporate Plan, the Communications Strategy and our Customer Charter which are key to meeting Swales, priorities and values.

Accelerating 'channel shift' and moving towards a truly inclusive digital service, with technology being there to serve our residents and not the other way round. Focusing the web service we provide to be 'customer centric', where understanding the user needs and designing a website that reflects this.

The Council is committed to providing easy-to-use, trusted and flexible information and transactional services that support our 'digital by desire' approach. For those resident where digital channels are less accessible we will ensure access is maintained through a network of 'assisted digital' service provision.

## Aims

The Access Strategy aims to focus the organisation as a whole in terms of its approach to customer contact and the provision of consistently high standards of customer service across the Council, irrespective of the service being sought, or the method of contact used by the customer.

It communicates our approach and vision to customer access and what actions and projects are needed to ensure that we interact with our customers in a more targeted and effective manner. It concentrates on the activities to be undertaken over the period 2016 to 2019.

We aim to improve service delivery through better use of technology and the manner in which the Council is able to provide alternative and more convenient access to information and services including usage of the website and social media.

The Council's Customer Access Strategy aims to continue to improve the quality and consistency of information and services received by its customers and to deliver such services in the most effective manner possible in support of a long term vision that:

- Allows customer-driven delivery: the Council needs to deliver the service where the customer needs it.
- Moves towards successful channel shift initiatives, by concentrating on ease of access, content, personalisation, forms, payment/integration and mobile services.
- Ensures that services meet the needs of customers.
- Ensures that service users can identify where services have improved.
- Increases levels of access to, and, satisfaction with, council services.
- Empowers our employees to manage and respond to customer contact positively.
- Improves access to services for hard to reach and minority groups.
- Exploits technology to enhance service delivery and information provided.
- Gets it right first time
- Continues to evaluate and progress joint working opportunities with partner organisations where this is mutually beneficial to the Council and its customers
- Creates an effective and positive presence for the Council in the social media sphere
- Heightens public interaction with us about where there are issues and to help us provide assistance where it is most needed

## Objectives

The objectives of this strategy are to ensure that:

- There is an appropriate and convenient choice of ways to access our services; whilst we will introduce more self service facilities as a means of customer access, we appreciate the importance of maintaining face to face and telephone access for those who need or prefer such methods
- We have a clear knowledge and understanding of our customers' needs
- Services are delivered in an efficient and cost effective manner, with our customers' needs and preferences in mind and in accordance with the stated service standards
- Our customers will, wherever possible, have to contact us only once and may easily track the progress of their enquiries
- We will deliver the services in an efficient and cost effective manner
- Information and communication to be provided clearly and concisely
- Encourage feedback, be it good or bad, and use to enhance the way we deliver services
- We work with and learn from others, through MKIP, Kent Customer Service Group, the Kent Channel Shift Project and other examples of good practise that we are able to learn from.

In delivering against these aims and objectives, and given the work undertaken to date, the Council will continue to focus on six main areas:

- Reviewing and recommending how best to deliver services and access channels in efficient and cost effective ways
- Continuing to design and deliver services to meet the needs and choices of customers, using technology to offer digital solutions and providing self service options wherever possible
- Continuing to improve internal and external communication in conjunction with Swales Communication First Strategy
- Expanding user feedback, engagement and consultation
- Improving customer data collection and performance measurement
- Embedding "Customer Service Excellence" standards and maintaining and achieving further national recognition

## Ways of accessing services and information

Swale Borough Council will take a strategic approach to reviewing customer access and ensuring that all of our services are available through as many convenient channels as possible.

We recognise that whilst the most cost effective way of service provision is through the website and automated services, which also provides access to services at all times, it is neither accessible nor preferable for all of our customers. We will therefore maintain face-to-face service provision in cost effective locations for our key services for those who need it, as well as phone access to all services where possible in partnership with other agencies, such as through Gateways.

Technology will be optimised to deliver digital self-service facilities as well as utilisation of the website and social media to provide clear and concise information.

We will promote new channels (ways to access our services), through greater publicity, resources to support new channels, mediation to support use of new channels and flexibility by responding to feedback in the use of the new channels.

Whilst promoting new service delivery channels, we will ensure that we consider issues such as access to technologies, training needs of our users and the need to encourage our customers to use different methods, through behavioural change initiatives.

Fundamental to the success of providing customer focussed services is the need to redesign our services, putting the customer requirement at the forefront of the provision. We will ensure that all services are regularly and effectively reviewed to ensure that the aspect of customer focus is key to our methods of delivery and access to the services. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is a key enabler to the transformation of our services.

We will work with our service managers to carry out fundamental reviews of the way we deliver our services to our customers and how we interact with them. We will develop a toolkit based approach for these reviews and provide support for the managers to deliver the improvements and learn from emerging best practise elsewhere.

Swale will continue to explore opportunities to improve ways of working through partnership with other service providers and through the actual customers experience and views.

### ***In summary, we will:***

- *Work towards the design and implementation of multi-channel services through digital means, putting our customers' needs at the heart of our service design*

- *Encourage more customers to transact digitally by offering various choices of contact*
- *Develop our services to be accessed on a self service basis through our website, mobile devices (tablets and smart phones including web chat facilities and apps where appropriate*
- *Provide means of access through a single interface “Single Citizen Account” so our customers can access and view all service requests through a single point, irrespective of contact method*
- *Build upon the successful implementation of the automated phone payments facility by providing a wider choice of services through this means*
- *Increase levels of customer engagement and accessibility of services*
- *Improve customer satisfaction through the provision of increased and more convenient ways of doing business with the Council*
- *Utilise social media to share information and promote Swale*
- *Ensure that the Council provides better value for money in terms of more cost effective service provision*
- *Ensure that customer information is maintained with full confidentiality and integrity of the information that is used to conduct business, with decisions based on data classification.*
- *Ensure that residents are not unfairly disadvantaged by the ‘digital divide’ by ensuring that key services are available through traditional (face to face and telephone) channels for those who need this, and by supporting those who wish to embrace the new technologies.*



## Customer engagement and feedback

We will engage with our customers and other stakeholders to determine that their service requirements are met through effective commissioning and value for money procurement. We will value all customer feedback, whether positive or negative. We will respond to feedback in a fair, honest and timely manner.

We will work to better understand the requirements of our customers and ensure that service provision is built around these needs; and not those of the provider. This will include ongoing reviews of our performance in delivering these services in order to achieve best value for our customers.

Customer insight and profiling information will be fully utilised to identify and deliver information and service provision which best suit the groups of customers most likely to use each of our services.

Through closer dialogue with stakeholders (customers and service providers) we will fulfil our “duty to involve” by ensuring that our services are fit for purpose through more effective commissioning. Commissioning is the process by which decisions are made about what goods and services are required.

We welcome customer feedback about our services and anything relating to the Council, be it good or bad. We promise to listen to comments and complaints about the services we provide and the way in which we deliver them to our customers and where possible continually improve our services to ensure they meet the needs of all residents.

There is a clearly defined procedure for submitting complaints to the Council

### ***In summary, we will:***

- *Use customer profiling to inform our service provision*
- *Where appropriate, create service specific focus groups with to identify opportunities for service improvement. This includes user testing on our website with real people*
- *Clearly publish and promote our comments, compliments and complaints process and positively encourage our customers to use the system*
- *Regularly publish information relating to complaints received, including how promptly we have responded and what actions were taken to resolve complaints*
- *Invite regular feedback on how we are doing and act on such feedback and let our customers know when we improve our service provision as a result of feedback received.*
- *Provide a choice of channel and have a consistent user experience across all channels.*

# Customer Charter

Swale Borough Council is committed to providing the best customer service we can in accordance with the organisations core values; FIRST:

- **F**airness, **I**ntegrity, **R**espect, **S**ervice and **T**rust

## When you use our services we will...

- Listen to your views
- Be professional, polite and helpful
- Take responsibility for your enquiry and deal with it as quickly as possible
- Treat everyone fairly
- Ensure our staff are trained to do their jobs effectively and efficiently
- Work with local people to provide local services

## Our aim is to...

- Answer phone calls promptly and make sure that you can speak to someone who can help you
- Reply to letters and emails within 10 working days
- See personal callers as quickly as we can
- Get things right first time and say sorry if we don't
- Provide a choice of ways to easily access our services and communications
- Communicate with you in a clear and understandable way
- Meet the departmental service standards that our staff are committed to
- Regularly review working practices to provide great service and value
- Make Swale a better place

## You can help us by...

- Giving us the information we need to help you
- Treat staff politely and with respect at all times - we will not be able to help you if you are aggressive, intimidating, threatening, violent or use bad language
- Letting us know when we do a good job or where we can improve our service

**(Note: This section needs further development to cover social media)**

## Standards

Corporate and service level standards will be published so that everyone who accesses our services knows exactly what they can expect and when they can expect the service to be provided. The standards will also make it clear what is expected of our customers when they access our services to help us deliver them in the most efficient manner.

We will regularly publish our performance levels against each of our service standards so that everyone can see how we are doing and what we intend to do to make improvements where they are needed.

Each service area will publish service standards specific to the services they provide, so that customer will know when and how they can expect the service to be delivered and how to track progress and follow up enquiries.

### ***In summary, we will:***

- *Ensure that all staff are aware of what is expected in terms of customer service provisions; specifically service standards and are properly trained in order to provide services to the stated standards*
- *Publish our customer service standards in our buildings and on our website so that our customers can clearly see what they can expect from us. These can be viewed at [www.swale.gov.uk](http://www.swale.gov.uk)*
- *Issue corporate guidelines and policies for all contact methods, including social media and web publishing*

## References

Equality and Diversity: <http://www.swale.gov.uk/equalities-scheme/>

Freedom of Information: <http://www.swale.gov.uk/freedom-of-information/>

Compliment, Complaints & Feedback: <http://www.swale.gov.uk/comment-complain-feedback/>

Communication First:

Data Protection:

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