

Customer Service Strategy



Enabling a resident-focused
Council



Havering
LONDON BOROUGH



In refreshing our Customer Service Strategy our motivation as a Council is simple: we want to make sure all our services deliver what our residents and service users really need, when they need it, and can access those services that best meets those needs. For us, this is central to providing excellent customer service.

We are already a very efficient and productive Council, and we do not take this for granted. But despite our best efforts, we also recognise the quality of our service doesn't always meet the standards we set for ourselves or want to see for our residents, businesses or stakeholders.

So this strategy restates our ambition to provide excellent customer service in everything we do, and in time, become known for the high quality of our service delivery. We understand this is a bold ambition, and rightly so, because we are ambitious for our Borough and the people we serve.

But we are also under no illusions, it will take time, effort and commitment from all of us at the council – including members, officers, and our delivery partners - for the Council to achieve this outcome. It will be a team effort, and we want residents to be part of this journey.

It will also be challenging in our current context of increasing demand for our services including adult and children's social care and higher demands for housing and temporary accommodation for vulnerable people and families. But we know we can protect delivery of core statutory services and raise customer satisfaction levels for residents. We are committed to do both, as reflected in this Administration's priorities for the Council and our new Corporate Plan 2024.

To help us on our journey, we will be introducing a new Customer Charter for the Council. It will set out our promises to you as a resident and the service levels you can expect when you interact with us. We need to use the latest in digital online technologies to make it simple and easy for you to do business with us, at a time that is suitable for you, rather than when the Town Hall is open to the public. We will of course ensure we make other ways of contacting us available for those that need additional assistance.

Our journey does not stop here: the strategy will adapt and evolve as we learn about what works well and where we need to do better, in a spirit of collaboration and partnership with all our residents. We invite you to be part of this journey, to take part in our survey work, where possible, to give us feedback and help us understand what we do well and what improvements we need to make.

If we get this right, we can become even more efficient and effective organisation, focused squarely on serving our residents and helping the Borough thrive in the years to come.

Cllr Paul Middleton, Cabinet Member for Digital, Transformation and Customer Services

This strategy sets out what we are going to do to become recognised for delivering excellent customer service in everything we do by 2026/27.

We want the Council to be an organisation where:

- We meet our customers' needs;
- Our customers and service users are always treated politely, professionally and with understanding;
- Our people have the skills and modern tools to provide excellent customer service;
- We foster a culture of curiosity, learning and openness to acting on feedback from our customers and service users; and
- We strive to continually improve the quality of customer experience for all our services.

This Customer Service Strategy builds on the modernisation ambitions set out in the Havering Way, Transformation work programme and our Digital Strategy and underpins delivery of the priorities set out in the Council's Corporate Plan.

Providing excellent customer service to residents, businesses and stakeholders is central to the council's modernisation and transformation agenda.

Getting this right will help us both reduce our costs, through reducing failure demand (e.g. chase up calls from customers) whilst also improving the customer experience for our residents.

Building on existing good practice, we want to bring the voice of our customers into the centre of how we design our services in the future, ensuring more consistency, ease of access and timeliness in how we deliver our services.

The work to improve the quality of all our services continues beyond the life of this strategy. It will help us shape our organisational culture in line with our ICARE values and Choose Havering principles and behaviours.

1.2 Background

Over the last few years, we have seen rising demand for our services, especially for adult and children's social care, along with higher demand for temporary housing accommodation, factors which place significant strain on the council's finances.

Like residents' budgets, the increases in the cost of living continue to impact the Council financially and our income falls short of the total cost of running all our services. The means we have to spend our money even more wisely and ensure every penny counts.

Most of all, we recognise that our residents, businesses and stakeholders expect more from us than ever before. With limited resources, it is hard to meet everyone's expectations of the council which is why we also understand it's now more important than ever to make sure we get things right first time, every time and make every interaction count.

For these reasons, our refreshed Customer Services Strategy clarifies our ambitions for customer service over the next three years, and explains what residents and businesses can expect from us in such a difficult financial context.

It also sets out at a high level how we will deliver our customer experience improvement agenda with limited resources - led by the customer services directorate - between now and 2026/27.

Over time, the actions set out in this strategy will drive up the quality of our services as experienced by customers and service users, and we expect to see increases in customer satisfaction rates.

Our customers' satisfaction, along with improved business outcomes, will be our ultimate measures of success.

1.3 About our Borough

The London Borough of Havering has an increasing diverse population.



Historically one of the highest proportion of older people in London, since 2011 it has experienced the highest increase of children aged 0-14 (19.7% in London) and the second highest in the UK.

We have also seen a 26.5% growth in 25 – 39 year olds. This mix of customers and communities create both challenges and opportunities all needing or wanting to engage with us,

through a range of means.

Over 80% of households living in Havering are considered “internet savvy”² and therefore we want to ensure we provide a digital first model for customers and service users needing to contact us at a time that is convenient to them.



1.4 Our service channels

We aim to provide our customers with the best possible experience 24 hours a day, seven days a week which an efficient digital offer will provide. We want our online services to be so brilliant that our customers will want to use them. We will also upgrade our corporate website to the highest (AAA) accessibility standard, where possible.

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However for those customers that are not familiar with or do not have access to the internet and need to speak to someone in person, we will continue to support these customers through an efficient telephone service or in person for routine transactional services at one of our local libraries or at the Town Hall. For those with a hearing impairment, we will continue to provide a text relay service for callers to our customer contact centre.



Services will also continue to be available in person at our Crematorium and at Langton's House for registration and wedding event services. More specialist type meetings can be arranged at our Appointment Centre at the Town Hall.

https://www.havering.gov.uk/info/20007/council_and_democracy/654/the_havering_vision

2 Mosaic Customer segmentation tool - Experian



We aspire to deliver excellent customer service in every interaction we have with our residents, businesses and other stakeholders.

2.1 Where we want to be

Our vision is to be an award winning organisation for customer service.

We are one of the most efficient and productive councils in the country and we want to match that reputation by also being known for the quality of our service delivery.

We aspire to deliver excellent customer service in every interaction we have with our residents, businesses and other stakeholders.

We want our customers to be satisfied with the services they receive from us. By customers, we mean our residents, service users and people from businesses who access our services.

2.2 Havering 2030

We will ensure that modern, customer-focused services, enabled by digital technology - where possible - are at the core of everything we do as a Council. So much so that it will become part of our DNA and “how we do things” at Havering.

We will ensure that all new services are digital first, supported by other channels, where necessary. This means all digitally confident residents can access them online, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, interacting with us when it best suits them rather than when we are ‘open for business’. Digital services, once developed, are also more efficient and cheaper for the Council to run, helping us manage our limited resources.

At the same time, customers who struggle to get online or who are less digitally confident, will have our help to use services, through modern telephony and, where available, face to face provision e.g. at our Appointment Centre at the Town Hall and at our Libraries. .

When interacting with us, we want to offer our residents, businesses and stakeholders a seamless journey that is simple and easy to access, and provides the right information, at the right time to address the enquiry and get it right first time.

We will reduce complexity and remove jargon from our letters and communications. We will speak with one tone of voice, politely and professionally when we interact with our customers.

We will make the most of the latest technological and digital developments, embedding them in how we deliver modern services to all our customers.

This ‘channel shift’ approach will help us deliver cost-effective services for routine/ transactional type services, and free up other resources to concentrate on more complex cases. It should also improve our expected business outcomes.



2.3 Our missions

To achieve our ambitious vision we have set ourselves three supporting missions:

1. To embed a customer centric culture across the whole Council;
2. To modernise how we deliver our services; and
3. To provide an improved customer experience to all Council services, information and advice.

By achieving these missions, and implementing the associated programme of work effectively, we expect to improve the customer's experience of our services. This will be captured by an expected increase customer satisfaction rates.

In time, we will become recognised as a leader in customer service in local government and start winning awards for the delivery of excellent customer service.

3.1 Where we are now

Currently, there are multiple teams across the council running first-point-of-contact services using a combination of post, phone, email and face to face interactions with a customer.

We have a Customer Contact Centre that handles the majority of first line telephone calls for services including Council Tax & Benefits, Housing Services, Environment Services including Waste and Street Cleaning, Public Protection, Planning & Building Control and Blue Badges.

However, our service delivery structure has evolved over time, in response to different pressures, and this has led to an increase in service-specific email addresses, mailboxes and dedicated telephone numbers that are managed locally by an individual service or team. When these are not managed effectively, it causes delays in responding to residents and that leads to dissatisfaction with the quality of our service.

For example, the council has one central number (**01708 434343**) but also publishes a number of direct telephone numbers for services making it more complicated for residents than it needs to be.

Also, standards of service and service-level performance varies between teams, which can lead to confusion and dissatisfaction for our residents. It is also difficult to track and monitor performance and the service residents are receiving.

With some notable exceptions - like the recent budget consultation with young people - it is also unclear as to what extent we regularly involve our customers in how we co-design and deliver our new services, or indeed test them before they go-live.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that we do not always put the customer at the centre of our thinking, preferring instead to design things around how currently we organise ourselves. This makes little sense to our residents or service users.

Automated emails are also issued without any specific contact details – often just signed as ‘Havering Council’ - which means it is then difficult for residents or service users to escalate an issue when the problem isn’t resolved.

Elected members and residents also complain when an email says the issue has been resolved and the case closed down, but the necessary work has yet to take place. Again, this causes unnecessary chasing emails and rework, frustration and reflects poorly on the Council as an organisation.

3.2 Where we want to be

We need to become much better at thinking about service delivery from the perspective of our customers, rather than the service delivery them.

We also want all our people to think about how they best serve their ‘customer’ whether that’s a resident, service user or indeed internal stakeholder, so that we are much more responsive to meeting the needs of our end users whoever they may be.

This is what we mean when we refer to a ‘customer centric council’ – putting the needs of customers ahead of any other consideration when we design, deliver or operate our services.

A service should not require an understanding of how local government works for it to be accessed; we want all our services to be simple and easy to use, so that the resident or service user gets the support or assistance they need for a particular issue.



3.3 How we will get there

To help us achieve this goal, in 2024/25 we plan to take the following actions:

- Publish and promote the commitments we have made in our new Customer Service Strategy for our organisation;
- Conduct an external benchmarking exercise to understand our strengths and weaknesses as an organisation, and provide a baseline upon which we can build;
- Join the Institute of Customer Service (ICS) in 2024 to help support our journey to becoming a customer centric organisation;
- Establish a panel of residents and representatives from business with whom we can work to design, test and learn when developing new products or services, putting the voice of our users central to all our change delivery activity;
- Review and better understand the current set of standards and service levels offered between different services, then work with Directorates to put in place changes so that residents receive a consistent service regardless of how they contact us;
- Internally recognise and celebrate high quality customer service provided by our staff, contributing to embedding a culture of excellent customer services across the whole organisation;
- Regularly reporting key measures of performance of our customer services across the whole organisation to our Performance Theme Board for constructive feedback and challenge from our elected Members;
- Review our Customer Service Standards and publish a new Customer Charter, setting out what residents, businesses and stakeholders can expect from us when they contact us regardless of channel or service (see Appendix 1).



In the longer term by 2026/27, we plan to:

- Standardise our non-specialist services across the council, creating a single front door for mostly low value, high volume transactional type activity. These are paper, telephone and email-based contact;
- Review our shared telephone numbers and voicemail, making sure that residents have clear and simple access to services, rationalising where possible to reduce complexity;
- Audit the number of shared email addresses/inboxes with a view to ensure they are managed consistently and appropriately, so that emails are responded to effectively;
- Introduce ‘mystery shopping’ exercises to give us feedback on how we’re doing so that we can respond and improve on things when they fall short of our agreed standards;
- Provide professional training, learning and support to all our workforce who interact with customers members of the public, helping us to professionalise and recognise this as a dedicated profession at the council;
- Review our major contracts with suppliers and ensure commissioned services are managing customer service outcomes effectively;
- Work towards achieving ServiceMark accreditation with The Institute of Customer Service (ICS);
- Put in place with services mechanisms for receiving regular customer feedback, specifically using existing tools (like CitizenSpace) for measuring our customers’ satisfaction with the quality of all our front facing services and using feedback to understand how best we can improve the service.



4.1 Where we are now

Our customers should be able to access our services when they are needed, at a time appropriate to them, rather than when it suits the council.

Too many of our services are only available during office working hours, making it difficult for some people to access those services.

We also tend to rely on telephony as the primary mode of communication for residents, as well as issuing formal letters from the council, which are both costly channels to maintain.

Residents too often need to navigate how the council is organised to speak to the right person, when ideally the information should be readily available on our website, organised by specific need rather than the service that delivers it.

4.2 Where we want to be

We can use and deploy the latest developments in digital, data and other technologies (including artificial intelligence) that will help us better serve our customers and better meet their needs.

When we provide a service online it is available 24 hours 7 days a week and when designed well can help resident interact with us simply and easily, allowing them to get on with their lives.

We also want to invest in our people so that they have the skills and confidence to know what 'excellent customer service' looks like and how it can be delivered.

This will take time and investment, but it has the added benefit that it will also contribute to developing our workforce with the skills we all need for the future.

4.3 How we will get there

To help us achieve this goal, in 2024/25 we plan to take the following actions:

- Explore how to introduce new channels, including text and online chat, as well as video support for customers;
- Ensure every service is accessible to all customers via relevant channels including with text, chat, as well as online;
- Where our services are face to face, provide excellent accessible facilities and maintain our buildings and grounds to the best standards possible;



- Explore the introduction of regular notifications for customers e.g. text and email reminders, information about appointments, progress updates and more for all services;
- Review the services we deliver at our Reception Centre at the Town Hall for those who need it most;
- Decommission Skype for Business as our current telephony solution and migrate to MS Teams telephony for the organisation;
- Rollout CaseTracker as a solution for all complaints and for member enquiries, allowing us to track our performance against internal SLAs;
- Develop a hybrid contact centre model, and support Town Hall reception with F2F service;
- Promote the safe use and adoption of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools and techniques, within a recognised ethical framework, that will enhance staff work productivity and creativity, especially for routine tasks like writing plain English letters and other communications.

In the longer term by 2026/27, we plan to:

- Invest in a modern corporate telephony platform so that we can track and monitor phone calls, and provide feedback to staff when things go wrong;
- Deploy automated call handling and virtual agents for simple transactions;
- Explore options for leveraging our investment in our Microsoft Dynamics D365 platform so that increase the availability of self-service channels e.g. promote online booking and payment services, helping us reduce internal administration costs;
- Publish our performance data openly, ensuring we can be accountable to the public and the rest of the Council;
- Automate more of our routine service requests and processes so that they are simple and easy to use, and they reduce the volume of calls to our Customer Contact Centre;
- Make our response levels clear to residents so that they know the service performance levels they can expect for the channel they are using.

5.1 Where we are now

Too much of our current information is hard to find on our website or is written in a very technical, jargon-filled way that is not easy for customers to understand or use.

Our website is now looking dated and is very heavy on the written word. It is overdue a refresh and would benefit from a fresh look and feel for the new administration. We also need to remove old and out of date content which is not helpful to users of our website.

5.2 Where we want to be

We need to move away from internal speak in all our customer facing material and spend more time publishing content from a customer's perspective. We also need to have one tone of voice when interacting with customers and drive up the quality of our written communications to customers.

We want our customers to be able to find the right information on our website easily and quickly, and only contact us when they really need to do.

5.3 How we will get there

To achieve this goal, in 2024/25 we plan to take the following actions:

- Remove old and out of date content from our website;
- Refresh our corporate website, moving to a new, modern template for the council, acting as a “single front door” for our core services;
- Provide advice and guidance to colleagues about how to write customer friendly letters and content for the website;
- Encourage more services to test their services with end users on a regular basis, ensuring anything that is customer facing has been through some form of user testing to check for accessibility, ease of understanding and simplicity;
- Bring together our customer contact centre team and our social media teams so that we provide a better, more joined up response to feedback given to us through a wider range of channels;
- Update our style guide – setting out our communication standards, branding and tone of voice for the council - and ensure this is adopted/embedded across the whole organisation;
- Produce regular lessons learned and insight from our Complaints team, and put in place improvements for customers based on the feedback;
- Establish a new customer experience and enhancement team (CEET) to help drive forward improvements across the Council.

In the longer term by 2026/27, we plan to:

- Introduce a ‘single front-door’ for all customer facing services, reducing the need for service led teams to manage telephone lines or deal with initial enquiries, freeing up staff to concentrate on more complex cases;
- Professionalise our customer service roles, with a clear career pathway and recognise their skills as a dedicated profession within the Council;
- As we conduct Service Reviews, look at simplifying how residents can access our services, using digital channels where possible, and designing them around the needs of service users.



This strategy will take three years to deliver. We recognise it will need to be deployed against a backdrop of an ever tighter financial situation for the council and where we have to make every penny count.

However, we believe getting customer service right first time, every time will bring significant benefits to both our residents and staff delivering services across the Borough.

Our key performance indicators (KPIs) set out in the Corporate Plan will also measure how we are performing against the missions set out in this strategy.

6.1 What success looks like

If successfully implemented, the strategy should deliver the following benefits:

- Improved customer service levels to residents, indicated by improved customer satisfaction;
- Happier, more productive and engaged staff;
- Reduced failure demand across the council - which is costly and time consuming to administer - caused by double or triple contact to us which is avoidable had we got it right first time;
- Make the organisation an attractive place to work, helping us become an employer of choice for new recruits;
- Improve trust and confidence in what the Council delivers for local taxpayers and service users; and
- Raise the profile of our organisation so that we become known as the best local authority for providing excellent customer service.

We will regularly review our planned activities and publish our progress in delivering this strategy, learning from experience about what works, and adjusting our plans if our context changes.



We remain committed, however, to providing excellent customer service levels to all our residents, businesses and stakeholders for the lifetime of this strategy and beyond.

Customer Service Standards

All our staff commit to delivering excellent standards of customer service and meeting customer expectations.

Our service

When you contact us we aim to:

- treat you in a friendly, fair and professional manner
- provide well trained and knowledgeable staff
- provide accurate and clear information in response to your enquiries
- deliver what we promise, dealing with any problems that may arise and keep you informed of any delay
- use plain language and not use jargon
- respect your rights to confidentiality, privacy and safety and provide a private area for confidential enquiries
- provide you with easy access to our services
- actively listen to our customers and use feedback to improve the services and products we provide now and in the future

Contacting us online

You can access most of our services and products online 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. When you self-serve we aim to:

- make sure all information on our website is up to date
- ensure our website and online processes are clear, quick and easy to use
- provide you with information on how long it will take to resolve your query
- use your feedback to improve our website

Contacting us by email or letter

When you write to us, we aim to:

- provide an acknowledgement within 2 working day for emails
- give you details of who is dealing with your enquiry
- respond to your enquiry within 10 working days.
- tell you when we cannot respond fully within 10 working days and tell you when we will be able to respond

Contacting us by telephone

If you need to contact us by phone, we aim to:

- resolve your enquiry or service request the first time you contact us. When this is not possible, we will inform you of the service that will help you and how long it will take to resolve your query
- advise you how and when you can access services online
- provide you with the name and department you are speaking to
- answer your call within 60 seconds

We record some calls for training and monitoring purposes.

Contacting us in person

If you need to visit us, we aim to:

- direct you quickly and efficiently to the right person
- ensure that our reception areas are accessible and welcoming at all times
- make an appointment for you where appropriate
- assist you if you have communication or access needs

When we visit you we will keep to pre-arranged appointments and show you our identification.

Customer Service Strategy Roadmap

