

Report title	Customer First Strategy
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Department	Customer Services
Exempt?	No

Purpose of report:

- **To resolve**

Synopsis of report:

This report sets out the vision for a ‘Customer First’ Strategy for the next three years to ensure the Council meets its objectives for the future. This, in turn, translates to a more efficient and effective organisation, ultimately fulfilling the Council's core mission of serving its residents.

Recommendation(s):

Members to approve the Customer First Strategy and associated action plan.

1. Context and background of report

- 1.1 With the majority of improvements outlined in the previous Customer Services Strategy 2017- 2020 having been delivered and with the new Corporate Plan, Corporate Themes and Service Action Plans in place, it is now time to consider how Runnymede will continue to meet customer expectations, giving greater choice, accessible, convenient and more responsive services at a cost the Council can afford.
- 1.2 The next chapter of our customer journey builds upon the significant improvements delivered through the previous strategy including:
 - Upgrading Revenues, Benefits, Housing, Planning, Land Charges and Document Management Systems
 - Upgrading the telephony system including call recording, integrated voice routing (IVR) voicemail and business continuity improvements
 - Combined website and CRM system
 - Direct Debits for Garden Waste
 - Introduction of a Customer Charter
- 1.3 Seeing things from the customer’s perspective and looking at processes holistically has enabled that strategy to be delivered. This customer-centric approach, along with continuous analysis of customer feedback (complaints, compliments, service requests), website data, social media insights and customer service records has allowed us to successfully deliver on the previous Customer Services Strategy.

1.4 At Runnymede, we believe every interaction is an opportunity. We are committed to providing a unified view of the Council for our customers, and for them to have the same experience with us. This ensures consistent service that meets our shared standards.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended

2.1 The aim of the Customer First strategy is to provide Runnymede Borough Council residents with the information they require at first point of contact wherever possible, in such a way as it meets their needs, yet still being affordable to the Council.

2.2 This strategy will ensure the whole Council is able to promote a 'Customer First' culture where customers are valued and receive high-quality services.

2.3 There are four key themes to the strategy:

- Delivering great customer experience
 - Right First-time approach
 - Staff Training & video tutorials
 - E-billing & On-line transactional improvements
 - Improved parking experience with flexible payment options
 - Customer Service Excellence review
- Knowing you better - a single view of the customer
 - Corporate complaints & compliments
 - Corporate Debt & Financial Inclusion
 - Review Local Council Tax Support scheme
 - Review of single person discounts
 - Customer engagement dashboards
 - Telephony enhancements
- Knowing us better - a single view of the Council
 - One Council – One Number
 - Expand OneAccount to other service areas
 - Unifying customer communication by reviewing all general e-mail boxes and external portals to link into the CRM
 - Align web content and on-line services to customer life events (Tell Us Once)
 - Expand on-line booking system to include appointments for services areas
- Accessible services
 - Utilise AI (Artificial Intelligence) technology to facilitate automatic email responses
 - Ensure the Council's website is compliant with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 accessibility standards
 - Introduce a Chatbot to assist customers with their on-line enquiries
 - Council wide review of customer access channels
 - Review the Council's IVR to improve call routing aligned to customer needs
 - Introduce a 'What's On' Marketing campaign

2.4 This Customer First strategy will be backed by a robust action plan that outlines the key projects and improvements we will deliver over the next three years. This plan will be a living document, reviewed and updated regularly to ensure we remain adaptable and responsive to customer needs.

- 2.5 To ensure successful execution of this strategy, we will establish a Customer First Steering Group. This group, comprised of key stakeholders across the Council, who will meet quarterly to monitor progress, address any challenges, and oversee the overall delivery of the strategy.
- 2.6 We're committed to ongoing engagement with residents and community groups throughout the implementation of the Customer First Strategy. We will be inviting representatives from relevant third-party groups and the public to provide a platform to share their challenges and suggestions, ensuring the strategy addresses customer needs. By understanding our customer priorities, we can tailor the strategy to deliver tangible improvements that matter most to our residents.

3. Policy framework implications

- 3.1 The strategy supports the following corporate values as identified in the Corporate Business Plan 2022-2026:
- Customer-focused
 - Performance driven
 - Innovative
 - Delivering excellent value for money
 - Promoting equality and diversity.

4 Resource implications/Value for Money

- 4.1 Expenditure outlined within the Customer First Strategy for year one activities have already been included in the Customer, Digital and Collection Services Action Plan for 24/25 and in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Capital programmes.
- 4.2 Activities identified for years two and three will be subject to robust business cases and approval sought through the Council's democratic committee process.
- 4.3 All reviews will follow the Council's Project Management and Service Review methodology.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 The strategy will comply with the General Data Protection Regulations and Equalities Act. Any procurement requirements arising from the strategy will follow the Council's Contract Standing Orders and other legislation.

6. Equality implications

- 6.1 Councillors need to demonstrate that they have consciously thought about the three aims of the Public Sector Equality Duty, as set out in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, as part of the decision-making process. The three aims the authority must have due regard for are:
- eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation.
 - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic.
- 6.2 The Council must pay due regard to any obvious risk of such discrimination arising from the decision before them. There is no prescribed manner in how the equality duty must be exercised though producing an EIA is the most usual method.

The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race (including ethnic or national origins, colour or nationality), religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation.

- 6.3 It is anticipated that this Customer First Strategy will have a positive impact on those with protected characteristics as two of the four themes focus on improving the customer experience and accessibility. A full EIA has been completed and approved by the Equalities Board on 30 May 2024.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 7.1 Various projects within the strategy will focus on the green agenda including the planned improvements to the Council's car parks, paperless parking permits, increasing on-line payments, Direct Debit, e-billing/invoicing, expansion of the 'Report it' functionality and other initiatives.

8. Risk Implications

- 8.1 There are several risks associated with Runnymede not having a current customer-focused strategy:

- **Dissatisfied residents:** Residents are the Council's customers and without a clear and transparent strategy to meet their needs, they are more likely to be frustrated and dissatisfied with the services they receive. This can lead to complaints, negative word-of-mouth, and a decline in trust in the Council.
- **Inefficiencies:** Without a clear plan for how to deliver service improvements, the Council is likely to be inefficient. This can lead to duplication of effort, wasted resources, and longer waiting times for residents.
- **Unmotivated staff:** Staff who do not feel valued or supported in delivering good customer service are less likely to go the extra mile. This can lead to a lower quality of service for residents.
- **Missed opportunities:** A customer service strategy can help the Council to identify new ways to improve services and meet the needs of residents. Without a strategy, the council may miss out on these opportunities.
- **Inconsistent service:** A new strategy can be challenging to roll out consistently across the organisation. Inconsistencies in how the strategy is applied can create confusion for residents, damage trust and increase costs. By having a Customer First Steering group that monitors progress, addressing any challenges and overseeing the delivery of the action plan, will reduce the risk of failure.

- 8.2 In conclusion, a 'Customer first' strategy is essential for any council that wants to provide good quality services to its residents and build a positive reputation.

9. Other implications

- 9.1 There are none.

10. Timetable for Implementation

- 10.1 As soon as practicable.

11. Conclusions

11.1 Prioritising customer needs is no longer optional, it is essential for success. By implementing a 'Customer First' strategy, the Council has the potential to reduce costs whilst promoting services and contributing to a positive community spirit. This, in turn, translates to a more efficient and effective organisation, ultimately fulfilling the Council's core mission of serving its residents.

11.2 This report has outlined the key elements of such a strategy, including streamlining service delivery, and empowering staff to deliver exceptional experiences. While challenges like unmet expectations and employee resistance exist, these can be overcome through careful planning, clear communication, and performance management.

11.3 It is recommended that members should:

- Approve the Customer First strategy.
- Develop a communication plan to inform residents and staff about the new approach.
- Implement training programs to equip staff with the skills needed to deliver exceptional service.
- Regularly monitor key performance indicators to track progress and identify areas for improvement.

11.4 By embracing a customer-centric philosophy, the Council can build stronger relationships with residents, enhance service delivery, and ensure a thriving future for the community.

12. Background papers

None

13. Appendices

- Appendix 1 Customer Services Strategy 2017-2020
- Appendix 2 Customer First Strategy 2024-2027
- Appendix 3 Equality Impact Assessment Questionnaire