

Understanding Customers Better,
Developing Digitally Driven and
More Efficient Services

2015-2020

A Customer Service
Strategy

Foreword

The council has a range of roles across the district. One of its key roles is providing residents with services and appropriate access to those services. Like most councils, East Herts has been continually seeking ways of improving its services and the way in which they might be accessed. 9 in 10 (90%) residents were satisfied with their local area as a place to live, whilst 70% of residents were satisfied with the way East Herts Council runs things. Just over two fifths (42%) of residents agreed that East Herts Council provides value for money (District Wide Survey 2013).

Alongside those developments and mindful of the financial challenges, we have introduced more automated and self-service opportunities for our customers, enabling them to access more services by doing things for themselves at times that are convenient to them. While this has had some success, it has for the large part meant publishing information, email addresses and developing electronic forms as a digital front end on to an existing system or process, so while it may have opened accessibility, efficiencies have been limited by existing processes.

The financial pressures look ever greater going forward and the need for ever greater efficiency in how we deliver and provide access to our services is forecast to grow almost exponentially in the foreseeable future. As an organisation we will need to undertake a more fundamental and more sophisticated approach to the challenges. While we need to continue to encourage customers that are able to, to use digital access and self-service, the Council must fundamentally design our services digitally, around our customers.

We have undertaken systematic analysis and amassed considerable knowledge to describe our customer base. Understanding how they access services now and what their preferences are. Putting the customer at the heart of what we do, we need to reconsider and possibly reshape services using that information and understanding on a service by service basis.

The purpose must be to consider each service provided and establish the optimal way of offering and delivering the service, which is itself digitally enabled. Where needed, we must redesign our processes for simplicity and efficiency, prioritising how services should be delivered and managing available choices with actions to influencing demand.

This strategy sets out the principle actions for our journey. The Council is here to help. By understanding our customers better we must deliver digitally enabled and efficient services for now and the future.

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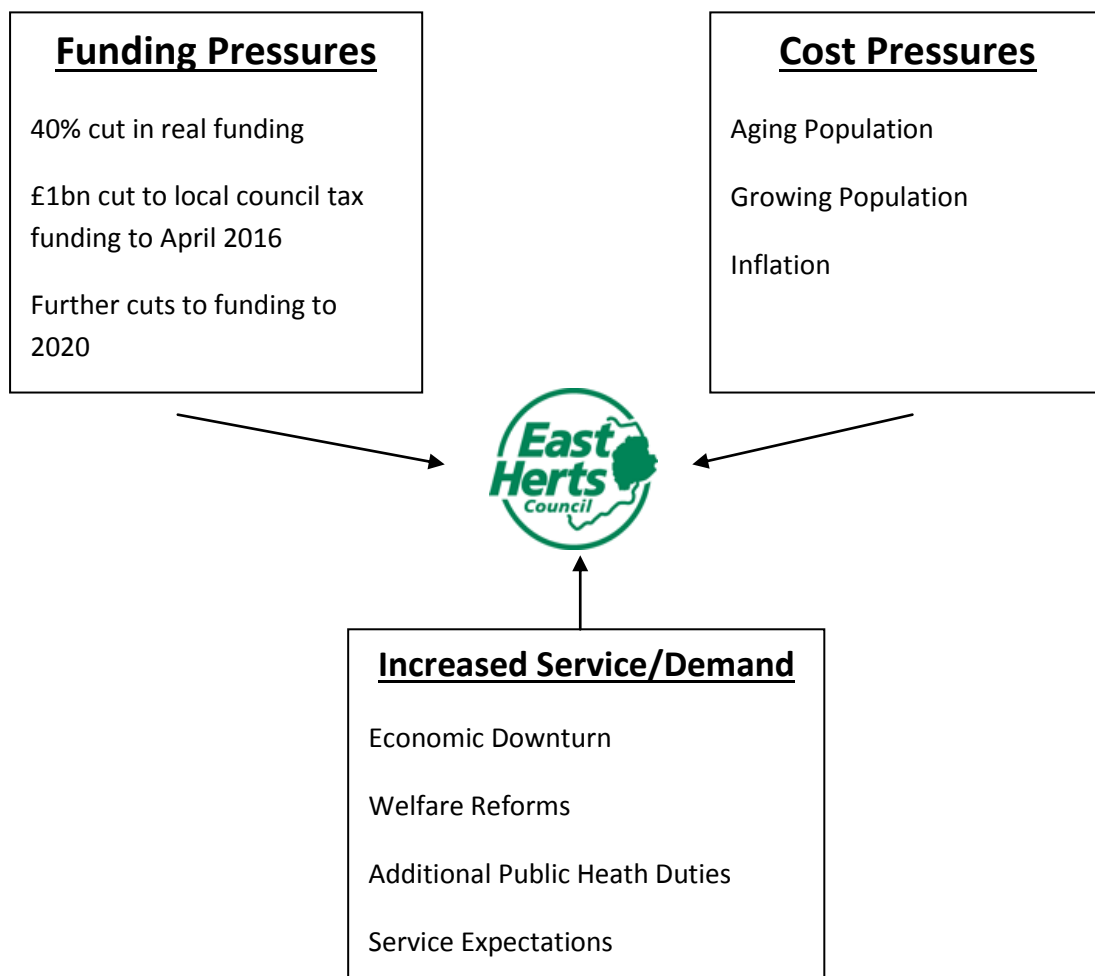
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The Need for a Customer Service Strategy

At a time of increasing demand driven by an economic downturn, demographic change and major government initiatives (such as Universal Credit and Troubled Families and new public health responsibilities) local authorities need to reduce costs even more, and maintain quality of services.

Meeting these demands requires service transformation rather than incremental change and different approaches will be appropriate for different services. Customer Service Strategy Evidence, 'Setting the Scene – Nation Picture' presents the key trends impacting local authorities.

As a district council our strength is our closeness to the residents and customers we provide services for and to. We need to be here to help, using a deep understanding of local needs and technological innovation to offer better demand management, more efficient handling of routine transactions and share data more to make services easier to get or use. This activity must be focused on providing improved outcomes for our residents and customers and financial efficiency.



Context

The Council adopted a Customer Service Strategy in 2008. This established key principles which are no less important now than they were then:

- Efficiency in dealing with simple enquiries and transactions, releasing professional staff from administration to focus on service.
- More cost effective ways of delivering service and moving those customers that can move, to the least costly methods of service delivery.
- To gain customer insight by capturing, recording and evaluating customer contact, service use and satisfaction.
- To gain knowledge of our customers and their future needs to enhance service delivery and ensure equality of access.

The Council also embarked on a major change programme, 'Changing the Way We Work' which delivered a step change in how Council Services were accommodated and provisioned. This included streamlining service delivery and operating costs.

However, the challenge remains to fuse expert service knowledge, insight into local needs, technological innovation and customer service management techniques to deliver services of good quality and low cost which are fit for the future.

Links to Our Organisational Strategy

East Herts Council's message to residents and businesses is that we are here to help. The Council is committed to ensuring the delivery of good quality services that reflect local priorities and resources, stated in our strategic priorities:

- People
Providing fair and accessible services for those that use them and opportunities for everyone to contribute - deliver strong and relevant services.
- Prosperity
Safeguarding and enhancing our unique mix of rural and urban communities, promoting sustainable, economic opportunities and delivering cost effective services - deliver value for money.
- Place
Safe and Clean; a focus on sustainability, the built environment and ensuring our towns and villages are safe and clean.

We must deliver the outcomes that local residents and communities want by:

- Providing efficient and joined up services, easily accessible to the customer
- Being a gateway for access. If you don't know who to ask, we will try to help or connect you with someone who can.
- Providing excellent service, ensuring our customers get the services or support they need whether provided directly through us or our partners

We want to understand local issues by:

- Meeting customer and service needs and continuing to develop the skills to deliver them
- Being flexible and resilient in response to change

SOURCE: Corporate Strategic Plan 2013/14 – 2016/17

An increased level of demand for services has been identified as a key strategic risk (Annual Governance Statement Action Plan 2014/15). Service plans, driven by the insight delivered by the Customer Service Strategy need to demonstrate the ability to adequately manage increased volume of contact from the public as well as improvements, removal of barriers to access and increased capacity within services where required.

The Council is committed to a culture of being 'Here to Help'. Everyone is engaged in a Council-wide effort to increase effectiveness to deliver a high quality customer experience every time. This defined the core values and behaviours of:

- Here to help
 - We are helpful and understanding
 - We listen and explain
 - We are knowledgeable and informative
 - We make time for our customers
 - We take ownership of an issue and we try to get it right first time
- We work together
 - We respect and value colleagues
 - We work together as one team
 - We recognise each other's skills and utilise them
 - We offer help and support to each other
 - We support colleagues to be flexible and resilient, able to respond to service changes and developments
- We aim high to make a difference
 - We go the extra mile
 - We take a pride in what we do
 - We continually look to improve our performance
 - We are flexible in our approach
 - We pride ourselves on providing excellent customer service

Understanding East Hertfordshire

Given the demands faced by the Council and the need to plan for sustainable services that meet the needs of our residents and customers now and in the future the Council and its services need to understand who are residents are, where different types of household are and understand how demographic changes may impact the demand and need for services.

This strategy therefore requires the application of key evidence bases to the design of services and how they are accessed now and in the future:

- Key Demographic trends in the District
- The Population Profile of East Hertfordshire
- Customer Preferences

These are presented in Customer Service Strategy Evidence, 'Setting the Scene – District Picture'.

Service Planning

The key themes arising from the current and future demographic trends and the profile of our residents influences the types and volumes of services needed now and in the future. These themes also influence the way in which we should plan to deliver services, as well as the external pressures impacting the Council. The themes need to be considered at a service level, using insight to inform the shape and priorities of service delivery.

Whilst district wide trends give an overall context for priorities, future plans and investments; it is essential to recognise that customers of individual services differ. For example a customer using the development management service in planning for an extension is likely to be different, having a different profile, to a customer in need of benefits support. An insight into each service's customers is needed to enable a customer focussed strategy, including their reasons for contact and the reasons for using the methods of accessing services that they do.

Accessing Services and Channel Shift

The profile of our residents impacts their likelihood to use different ways of accessing services.

Given our current demographic profile and overall social affluence the use of modern technology, digital based services and methods of contact outside normal working hours will be expected to be high. A take up of digital services would be expected, showing that there will be opportunities for efficiency and highly rated services as a result.

By applying the district profile to method of access for government services (utilising Ofcom data for access channel use) it would be expected, now, that:

- 32% should access service via email
- 25% should access by the internet
- 34% should access by telephone

However, the district wide survey assessed our customer's current preferences for the future as:

- 48% telephone
- 29% email
- 7% website

This would indicate a potential for shifting to digital channels and that customers may need to be made aware of and encouraged to shift channel. Developing a strong website based service would be reasonably expected to deliver a shift.

The preference for using email has increased by 7% 2009 to 2013, with telephone falling by the same amount. The preference for website use has remained constant. This may reflect factors such as:

- A higher demand for services leading to difficulties in using the telephone to access services.
- An increase in the use of email for its convenience as a record and audit trail of service.
- An inability to use the website to directly access the service desired.

By applying service level insight, understanding the customers of each service, specific expectations of channel use may be established and evaluated against actual use. This may include developing and enhancing face to face service for customers where it is needed, particularly recognising that the district includes pockets of minority groupings who will naturally need and access the Council's service differently.

Newer, more immediate, web chat and social media based channels of accessing Council services must also be planned and prepared for the future. Whilst take up of these services is slow and low for district council services their use for connected service delivery is inevitable.

Residents and customers expect access channels to be connected, linked together. For example, frustrated customers who are unable to access the information or service they desire by telephone will use other channels of access, expecting their enquiry to be enabled across whatever method they choose as right for them at that time. The Council will be expected to match up communication and service delivery across these channels. The Council may take the opportunity to proactively promote particular channels, by making service responsiveness better, as these channels may be more effective and efficient for the Council.

Customer Service Strategy

Principles

The key strategic principles remain apposite and unchanged.

- Efficiency in dealing with simple enquiries and transactions, releasing professional staff from administration to focus on service.
- More cost effective ways of delivering service and moving customers that can move, to the least costly methods of service delivery.
- To gain customer insight by capturing, recording and evaluating customer contact, service use and satisfaction.
- To proactively maintain knowledge of our customers and their future needs to inform continuous development of better service delivery and ensure equality of access.

Priorities for Action

The Customer Service Strategy builds on the outcomes already achieved through the Council's 'Changing the Way We Work' programme and the work already underway to streamline and web enable services. The Council must embed customer insight at both district and service levels within the service planning process.

By reviewing the key demographic trends, the population profile of East Hertfordshire and customer preferences, clear issues for East Herts emerged.

These issues were considered within workshops by members, staff and managers who all contributed to identifying the key priorities based on this evidence base and their own experience. (See Setting the Scene – Workshop Outputs).

The key priorities for action to deliver change for 2014–19 are therefore for:

1) Embed Customer Insight in the Service Planning Process

- Each service to develop evidence based plans using insight about its customers, understand their current methods of accessing services and the reasons why.
- Each service must use insight to anticipate and mitigate changes in demand.

2) Focus on Channel Shift

- The scope for change must be established using demographic trends and customer profiles with targets and actions being set to develop even more digitally delivered services (including self-service) and encourage more customers to use them where they are able to.
- Growing and promoting the connected digital delivery of services for each service across website, webchat, email, electronic forms and social media.
- Develop entirely digital service (across all access channels) wherever possible and cost-efficient; based on efficient and lean digital business processes to deliver high speed, always available, high quality services.
- Develop support to transition customers to digital self-service or enable their supported use, as customers in need will still visit us and we will still need to visit them.

3) Revised Service Standards – Quality and Responsiveness

- Digital Service delivery is ever growing and important. Standards of quality and responsiveness need to be set out and monitored for all digital channels including email, social media and web chat.
- Encouraging customers to use digital self-service and digital access channels with different service standards to promote take up and use.

4) Focus on Minorities

- The minority groups within East Herts need to be more understood by each service and the most effective methods to provide services to those more vulnerable and in need be identified.
- Alternative models of service delivery, suited to those in minority and high need groups, must be developed.

5) Maintaining Access

- All customer groups must be able to access our services; no-one should be disadvantaged by any actions we take. Equality and Diversity service impact assessments must include a review of the equality of access to services and evaluate any impact of planned changes.

Implementing the Customer Service Strategy

How Will the Approach Work?

Each service produces an annual service plan and actions for the year ahead according to the defined strategies and priorities of the Council. These are approved by Council every year and monitored throughout the year.

Service plans currently contain a section on customer insight and consultation which requires the presentation of any consultation undertaken, the knowledge that resulted and any resulting service improvements made. This section also allows for future consultation to be detailed and the reason for the consultation.

The council will enhance this considerably so that it becomes part of the formulation of plans and priorities, projects and investments; using knowledge of the location, key demographic trends and profiles of the customers of each service. This will be required to be used to formulate plans for service development, set access channel targets and actions to digitize service delivery processes.

In addition to adding to the knowledge and evidence based actions there will also be a requirement to determine the shape of the customer contact that is currently on offer and to identify the potential expectation to shift towards digitally based services, with actions specified to pro-actively influence the current customer contact model for each service. These actions will be linked to the Council's IT strategy and investments in future service delivery.

How will it be measured?

The existing service plan monitoring processes will enable individual services to log outcomes.

The achievements in terms of customer contact and outcomes in terms of establishing new methods of service delivery, achievement against targets will also be part of the individual service plans.

The service level actions will be aggregated to identify the Council's overall approach and action plan for the Customer Service Strategy to be established.

Service level plans for managing customer contact effectively and efficiently, actions for channel shift and targets will also be aggregated so that achievements towards the Customer Service Strategy and channel shift may be monitored and evaluated.