

# Customer Service Strategy October 2022

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## Foreword: Portfolio Holder for Governance



As we recover from the global pandemic, we want to provide high quality services that suit our customers.

The way that we provide our services has significantly changed over the last few years and as technology continues to develop, as well as individuals needs and expectations, it is important that we do the same.

We need to ensure our services are accessible to all users whilst recognising the importance that technology plays. This means those that require additional support are just as able to access our services as those using our digital channels.

This strategy sets out what we want to achieve over the next three years and how we will do it.

The council has a [Corporate Strategy](#) with the vision to extend opportunity and prosperity to all, using joint working to seize opportunities that will build a legacy of growth, inward investment and shared prosperity for Harlow.

This ambition will be achieved through four key strategic themes that will guide the focus of it. The customer services function feeds into two of these strategic themes particularly, those being Social Cohesion and an Efficient Council.

We want every interaction that customers have with us, regardless of who with or how, to be of the highest quality with clear information on what we can do to help, given timescales on when we will do it and if things go wrong, what we will do to put it right.

We will also link the key themes from both the Community Engagement and the IT strategies to ensure that we join up our service delivery.

We recognise that customer service is not a single team function and that the whole council, HTS Group and our other partners have a role to play. We know it is important that we get things right first time.

It's essential that as a council we develop our services to be the best they possibly can be. We don't just want to be comparable to the best that any other industry has to offer, we want them to be the best.

Councillor Alastair Gunn  
Portfolio Holder for Governance

## **Where are we now**

The first point of contact for council services is Contact Harlow. Customers can also access most services online through our website.

The most common enquiries received relate to waste and recycling, environmental services and housing enquiries.

We receive in the region of:

- 145,000 calls a year to Contact Harlow
- 12,500 visitors to the Civic Centre
- 10,000 payments made at the cash office, 100,000 on the phone and 60,000 through the website
- 44,000 online service transactions, 980,000 visits to the website.

The HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd repairs centre receives around 65,000 calls per year directly in relation to housing and commercial property repairs.

The council provides a cash office service that, although popular with those that use it, has seen its volume of transactions reduce significantly as customers move to alternative payment methods. Face to face advice has also declined by around 80% since the pandemic whilst phone calls have remained at constant levels.

To ensure we could help customers during the Coronavirus pandemic, a significant amount of work was done to improve our online services by refining our processes and developing our website to ensure information was easily available and in a fully accessible format. This development has meant that there are very few things that can't now be done online which has improved the customer experience.

We know that there is more to do and processes are continually being refined. The Contact Harlow team work closely with all services to ensure that they are not only capturing the correct information but that the process is as smooth and easy for the customer as possible.

Feedback tells us that although there are areas of very good practice our level of customer service isn't always consistent and we need to ensure our replies to customers are both relevant and timely.

We know that we need to have clearer timescales on resolving enquiries and ensure we meet them.

We work closely with HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd and our current and future partners to ensure that a high-quality service is provided. Customers are generally complimentary about the service they receive, but we need to ensure that this consistent.

## **What do we want?**

Our Customer Service Ambitions and goals are:

1. High quality, high performing services and staff that provide value for money
2. Easy access to all our services for everyone using a wide range of channels
3. Digital channels that are designed to be the most efficient way of accessing the council
4. Clear guidelines of what we will do, how we will do it and when by
5. Consistently high customer service from the council, HTS and other partners
6. To continually improve services by using customer insight and emerging technology

## **How will we do this?**

Through a number of Customer Service outcomes, we will achieve our customer service goals:

We will create a 'One Harlow' customer care programme creating a culture that puts the emphasis on all council staff and HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd to make sure that everyone understands the importance putting the customer at the very centre of what we do. It will break down silos, ensure there is ownership of enquiries and make sure that at all stages, customers are kept fully informed of progress.

We will develop feedback mechanisms from our customers, staff, councillors and partners to ensure we continually improve our service delivery, learn from mistakes and create a 'right first time' culture.

We will explore physical changes to the Civic Centre to reflect how customers will interact with us in the future. This will include the provision of cash services, reduction in size of reception area to free up space for other purposes and the move to appointment-based services.

We will review our processes to ensure that they are joined up across the council and that customers only need to provide us with information once.

We will review our staffing levels to ensure that there is the right balance of staff in the right areas dealing with customer enquiries.

We will ensure that information exchange between services, Customer Advisors and customers is kept relevant. All service requests will be tracked and able to be reported on at any point.

We will use customer insight on enquiries and complaints so that corrective action can be put in place, ensuring that the same issue does not arise again and make our processes smoother and more efficient.

We will continue to develop full system reporting that picks up trends and blockages across the customer journey and use this to improve what we do.

We will work closely with HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd and our partners to ensure that they meet the same high-quality level of service that we aspire to.

We will publish clear service standards outlining what you can expect when you contact us and ensure that they are met.

We will review all our written correspondence to ensure that it is clear, avoids jargon and is easy to understand, reducing the need for follow up questions.

We will ensure that any interaction, which could be avoided by improving self-service facilities, is identified and the necessary improvements made.

We will develop our payment systems so that they are easy to use and cover all services the council provides.

We will continue to develop our online and digital services with improvements and ensure they are promoted. This includes behind the scenes tweaks such as mapping improvements, location services, visual layout and accessibility.

We will develop our use of social media and technology to ensure that customers can interact through it with us in a way that suits them and is secure and convenient.

We will empower our front-line staff to make decisions where appropriate to reduce delays and improve our performance.

We will be bold. Just because something has always been done in a certain way, it doesn't mean it always has to and we will make changes if there is a better way of doing things and ensure we future proof our services.

### **Next Steps**

The best people to tell us how we are doing are our customers. We will make sure that we listen to them and use the feedback to improve. The Customer Services Strategy Action Plan will sit alongside this strategy to ensure that we do what we say we are going to. This will be updated regularly and the progress reported on through our performance framework.