



Customer Service Strategy 2008 – 2011



Making it Happen – Improving Customer Services in Halton

Supporting the Councils Corporate Plan 2006-11

FOREWORD

This strategy is about our vision for the future of Customer Services in Halton. It is a vision that puts our citizens at the heart of public service provision and will drive customer focused change that will help us achieve services for all that are efficient, effective, excellent, equitable and empowering.

Halton, as a Council, needs to meet the new challenges that the government have put forward in its Customer Service Excellence Standard, produced by the Cabinet Office in February this year, (2008).

This Strategy aims to lay down how this will be achieved. It will identify methods for continuous improvement by analysing the current capability of the Council and its partners and using these findings to improve on the efficiency, effectiveness, excellence, equitability and empowerment that already exists in relation to customer services within the Council.

It recognises the importance of gaining and understanding the opinion of customers in order to shape the future design of services. It also places value on the input from the staff that deliver these services, and will be looking to find ways to allow individuals and teams to acquire new skills around customer focus and engagement that will enable them to deliver improved services for customers.

Research indicates there are certain areas of particular importance to customers, these are: delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism and staff attitude.

This Strategy will help to develop new approaches to address these issues and will do so by basing itself on the governments Customer Service Excellence Standard, which addresses these issues through five main categories: Customer Insight, the Culture of the Organisation, Information and Access, Delivery, and Timeliness and Quality of Service.

The success of the strategy will depend on positive joint action between the various departments of the Council and with other public and private organisations and local voluntary and community sector groups. In particular, we must ensure that our citizens are at the very heart of the decision-making processes about the type and variety of services they want and need. This document is the first step towards that commitment.

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1.0 WHAT IS CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE?

Customer Service Excellence is exactly as it says. It is about ensuring that as an organisation we can provide excellent services for customers. Customers are defined in this strategy as being both 'external' and 'internal'. That is, people to whom the Council and its partners outwardly deliver services and those whom the Council and its partners work with and who contribute to part of a process of delivering services. Also, when using the word 'customer', consideration should be given to 'potential' as well as 'existing' customers.

Excellence is linked to being efficient, effective, equitable and empowering. In other words, it means making the best use of resources to provide quality services that meet the needs of customers, in a fair, consistent and informative manner, and placing the customer at the heart of the decision making process with regard to the design and provision of services. To do this it is first and foremost important to be able to know who our customers are. Once we have this 'insight' we can then ask people whether or not they are satisfied with any service they may receive and what their future needs and preferences are.

Research indicates there are certain areas of particular importance to customers, these are: delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism and staff attitude.

By using the Cabinet Office's Customer Service Excellence Standard the Council will test its capabilities, in relation to customer insight, the culture of the organisation, information and access, delivery, and timeliness and quality of service. This will help determine the Council's strengths and weaknesses in relation to these and to look for ways to remove weaknesses and build on its strengths. It will help to explore the skills that are required in the area of customer focus and engagement, which can then drive continuous improvement by building the capacity for delivering improved services. Furthermore, it is a means by which to validate the achievement of excellent standards by openly demonstrating competence, identifying key areas for improvement and making and celebrating those improvements. The Strategy will be a 'living' document, updated to take account of the changing context and learning gained from experience.

2.0 THE PURPOSE OF THE STRATEGY

2.1 Vision

The purpose of the strategy is to set out a plan to ensure that Halton Council and its partners provide excellent customer service. The vision is to put our citizens at the heart of public service provision in order to drive customer focused change that will help us achieve services for all that are efficient, effective, excellent, equitable and empowering.

2.2 Aims

Halton aims to provide excellent customer focused services through:

Gaining Customer Insight...

- Understanding our customers
- Consulting with customers and using the information we receive to improve services
- Measuring Customer Satisfaction

The Culture of our Organisation...

- Committing to putting customers at the heart of service delivery
- Demonstrating staff are polite and friendly to customers
- Valuing the contribution staff make to delivering customer focused services

Information and Access...

- Providing information about the full range of services we provide to customers and involving them in the design of this provision
- Making our services easily accessible to all customers
- Delivering co-ordinated services with our partners

Delivery...

- Agreeing with our customers a set of service standards at the outset so that they know what they can expect from the service we provide
- Demonstrating that we benchmark and share best practice
- Our commitment to deal effectively with complaints and learn from them

Timeliness and Quality of Service...

- Advising our customers and potential customers about our promises on timeliness and quality of customer service
- Meeting our standards for timeliness and quality of customer service.

2.3 Objectives

The objectives of the strategy over the next 3 years are to:

- Demonstrate leadership and commitment from the top of the organisation downwards by involving Members and senior officers of the Council.
- Review current documentation such as the corporate plan and service plans and other policies and strategies and ensure they reflect good practice and are understood by staff and customers.
- Establish the current capabilities of the Council in relation to customer service excellence by carrying out a corporate self-assessment, using the Cabinet Office self-assessment tool.
- Investigate the possibility of seeking formal accreditation to the Customer Service Excellence Standard in order to demonstrate the Council's competence and acknowledge the achievement of staff by rolling out the assessment process to other services with a view to obtaining accreditation across the board.
- Benchmark with other authorities and public and private sector organisations in order to examine their customer service arrangements, in particular the involvement of customers and staff in the development of services and customer service practices, to determine if there is any good practice that could be used in Halton's arrangements.
- Consult with customers, staff, officers, Members and partners about how they would like to be engaged in the design of services and good customer practice.
- Develop a set of agreed customer service standards outlining our promise to them in particular to interact with them in a polite, professional, informative and timely manner.
- Determine the type and range of customer service information, currently in use and how it is presented to different audiences, in particular hard to reach groups, to ensure it is relevant and easily understood, with a view to improving access by these groups and ensuring they are appropriately engaged in the decision making processes with regard to local services.
- Consider the development of new technology in relation to customer service and the physical location of public service sites in order to make services accessible to as wide a range of customers as possible.

- Determine the need for customer care training and other skills development in order to ensure that staff and partners understand the idea of customer focus and engagement, thus building their capacity for delivering improved services.
- Draw conclusions and make recommendations based on the above in order to develop an action plan through which to deliver the strategy.

Desired Outcome

The further improvement of excellent customer service practices across the Council and with partners, through which customers, staff, officers, Members and partners can develop their role in shaping excellent customer service standards. This will enable them to be confident that it will comprehensively and positively help to drive continuous improvement and allow the Council to achieve customer services that are efficient, effective, excellent, equitable and empowering and of mutual benefit to the business and the individuals and communities the Council and its partners serve.

3.0 CONTEXT

3.1 Links with National Strategies, Policies and Plans

Central Government have been keen to develop customer service practices within local authorities for some time. The introduction of Best Value in 2000, increased this focus, with the emphasis on continuous improvement in all areas of Council business.

This was then superseded by the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in which it states in the Framework for Comprehensive Performance Assessment of District Councils from 2006 that:

“...best value Authorities have a statutory duty to put in place arrangements to secure continuous improvement in their functions having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness”

Further changes outlined in the White paper “Strong and Prosperous Communities”, by the Department for Communities and Local Government, (DCLG), October 2006, also brought about a revision in the duty of best value. Councils were required to revise the best value duty to secure the participation of citizens and communities in the delivery of local public services, with the DCLG believing that this would help drive up public standards.

There have been other more specific changes relating to customer services such as the introduction of the e-government agenda, (ODPM 2002). This required local councils to e-enable as many of their services and functions as possible. This brought about a radical increase in the use of e-mails and internet for engaging with customers as well as the development of centralised call centres.

Other national Acts and initiatives include those around Community Engagement, Community Cohesion and Equality and Diversity. With regard to the latter there have been fundamental strides to improve equality in recent years around the areas of Disability, Race, Religion, Gender and so forth. This year, 2008, saw the introduction of the Equality and Human Rights Act. These all have fundamental implications for the way in which Councils and all businesses and individuals engage with other people in a fair and equitable way. In terms of customer service and “access” it means that methods will have to be employed to enable disabled people to access services, either physically through the provision of ramps and lifts to allow access to public buildings or through other means for example, to enable blind and deaf people to liaise with the Council. Similarly information should be accessible in other languages for those whose first language is not English.

In February of this year (2008) the Cabinet Office introduced the Customer Service Excellence Standard, effectively replacing the Charter Mark Standard. Its purpose is to put citizens at the heart of public service provision and is a practical tool for driving customer focused change.

It emphasises the need to gain customer insight and the development of an organisational culture that is customer centric. If customers can be properly identified, understood and engaged then improvements in information, access, delivery, timeliness and quality of service should follow.

Even more recently the White Paper “Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power”, (July 2008), announced a review to look across the public sector, private sector and internationally to consider the feasibility and practicality of introducing and extending the idea of redress for citizens where their council services fail to meet agreed standards. The review is also taking a wider look at how the customer can be put at the heart of local service delivery.

Clearly the role of the citizen at the heart of public service provision and customer focused services is of paramount importance to central government and therefore local government as a way of driving continuous improvement and is central to customer service excellence.

3.2 Links with Local Strategies Policies and Plans

The following corporate areas, strategies etc have varying degrees of impact on the elements within the Cabinets Customer Service Excellence Standard.

- Research & Intelligence Unit resource (e.g. demographic, geographic information etc)
Research and Intelligence Unit are able to provide advice on consultation methods/survey design etc)
- State of the Borough Report 2006
- Halton Observatory
- National BVPI survey on satisfaction every 3 years. From October 2008 this will be replaced by the Audit Commission Place Survey.
- BV Satisfaction Survey (Libraries/Leisure developments ensued)
- Citizens Panel
- HDL/Corporate Contact Centre (Corporate Standards)
- Staff Survey/Employee Opinion Survey
- Staff suggestion scheme
- IIP (in key corporate areas?)
- In house Training Programme (customer care and management training etc)
- HR guidance on recruitment procedures
- JDs and Person Specifications
- Workforce Strategy
- Working Flexibly for You Strategy
- Core Briefings(feedback form)/Monthly staff briefing sessions
- EDRs
- Performance Management Framework: recent review revealed the need to work more closely with partners, (work with LSP team, SSPs now started). Performance management training provided. Annual

Performance Plan. Performance Management benchmarking with a 4 star Authority. Performance Monitoring.

- Service planning: Service Planning Guidance provided. QA process enforces the need to utilise customer/community involvement in developing services. Quarterly monitoring reports. Quarterly and annual performance reporting against standards and targets. Monthly BVPI totals. The findings of satisfaction surveys have been fed into service plans and have informed developments.
- Divisional /Team Plans
- BVPIs/National indicators
- Local Indicators
- LAA Targets
- CPA/CAA
- Government standards on best practice
- Base Budget Reviews
- Asset Management Plan/Strategy
- Equalities and Diversity Group: external validation of the Equality Standard for Local Government at Level 3 achieved. There is also equality and diversity training for front line staff and managers.
- Most issues relating to fair treatment are covered by corporate policies including customer care, equal opportunities monitoring, racial incident reporting.
- Engagement Strategy

4.0 WHERE ARE WE NOW?

4.1 Customer Insight

Customer insight is about clearly identifying who our customers are and being able to gain an in-depth understanding of them from recently acquired information. The Council wants to make sure it is effectively identifying customers, consulting with them in a meaningful way and efficiently measuring the outcomes of this approach. This is vital to the Council in order to achieve continuous improvement.

To assist in this the Council has a central Research and Intelligence Unit which holds valuable and useful demographic, geographic and socio-economic information about the residents of the borough. This information can be broken down by various characteristics and segmentation, such as age, gender and so forth and by a variety of methods including, postcode, ward or super output areas. This information is gathered through a variety of sources including census and other central government data and has helped to shape the Council's priorities. In particular a piece of work entitled the State of the Borough Report, (2006), was influential in this process.

The Halton Observatory is another valuable and unique source of information about residents. The Observatory is an interactive information service, accessible via the internet that allows partners in the Halton Strategic Partnership to pool and share information and knowledge on Halton and its local communities. It can be used to select from a number of live, fully interactive applications for analysing and presenting the data, for example, mapping, ranking, comparing, tabling and profiling.

The Research Unit also regularly carries out Citizens Panel surveys through Halton 2000, which is an ongoing panel of Halton residents organised by Halton Borough Council. The panel contains around 2,200 local people who are broadly representative of the local authority area.

The Research and Intelligence team provide a competent range of research services and can also provide advice and guidance on; Research Methodology, Questionnaire Design, Coding, Scanning and Verifying, Data Entry, Inferential Statistical Analysis and Report Production.

Some services also undertake their own research and built up their own detailed profiles and purchased profiling systems.

The annual review of service plans also requires services to identify their customer base. In particular, they are required to say how they deal with equality and diversity issues and ensure they have an understanding of hard to reach groups.

Additionally, individual reviews are undertaken where it is essential to identify the customer base as part of the review process, for example the recent Overview and Scrutiny review of Performance Management has resulted in an Action Plan which includes the introduction of new technology and reporting to allow for a wider range of information being made available to suit the varying range of stakeholders.

Regular consultation is also a fundamental aspects of the way in which the Council engages with its customers. Methods and approaches used include focus groups, surveys and observations and the Council has developed its own Engagement Strategy with partners.

The National Best Value Performance Information survey on satisfaction has been conducted every 3 years since 2000. From October 2008 this will be replaced by the Audit Commission Place Survey. The survey covers a wide range of themes ranging from local areas, local public services, local decision making, voluntary work, respect and consideration and community safety. It will provide some very valuable answers to customer service issues when the results are available in mid – late January 2009, which may save the need for further consultation by other Council departments or partner organisations.

Customer experiences are also analysed through focus groups, mystery shoppers, customer journey mapping and customer complaints. A recent review of the Corporate Complaints review saw the production of a clearer acknowledgement letter to help make customers more aware of what they can expect from the complaint process. This came about in response to customer comments.

4.2 The Culture of the Organisation

A transition is required across the Council and its partners from a service focused to a customer focused culture. Key to this is the ability of the Council and its partners to demonstrate that they value and understand their customers and can then develop operations and procedures to meet customer needs and expectations. It requires staff to have a professional and positive attitude towards customers, lead and supported from the top, with the goal of improving service delivery.

The Councils Corporate Plan clearly states, under the priority of Corporate Effectiveness and Efficient Service Delivery, (Area of Focus number 32), that the Council with its partners aims to:

”Build on our customer focus by improving communication, involving more service users in the design and delivery of services, and ensuring equality of access”,

This goes a long way to demonstrating that there is leadership from the top, supporting the fundamental principals on which to build customer service excellence.

Other corporate policies within the Council also reflect this such as the:

- Corporate Consultation Strategy
- Engagement Strategy
- Corporate Performance Management Framework (including Service Planning)
- Corporate Complaints
- Equality and Diversity Scheme.

This strategy in itself is also a demonstration from the top of the commitment of the Council to achieve excellent customer service practices.

Furthermore, the existence of the central Research and Intelligence Unit indicates support for clear and accurate information, much of which relates to residents and other individuals and communities using the Councils services.

It is important to the Council that staff are given the opportunity to comment on their experiences of work and services and that they are able to do this in a variety of ways, for example, periodically, there is a staff survey. In addition, every member of staff has a six monthly Employee Development Review, (EDR), where they are free to express their opinions about the work or service they are involved in and to ask about training to obtain new skills that are pertinent to their job and can help them improve their level of service delivery. Monthly Core Briefings from senior management also provide the opportunity for staff to respond to key issues, including services delivery issues, via their manager and a feedback form. Opinions can also be voiced through the staff suggestions scheme, the staff forum and 'Chats with the Chief'.

It is important that that the Council can also demonstrate their commitment to developing customer focused services through recruitment, training and development policies. Job descriptions and person specifications for those dealing with customers will, as a rule, state the need for a potential employee to be able to demonstrate their ability to communicate well with others and to be polite and friendly to customers. In addition, there are a number of relevant in-house training programmes relating to customer care and management of customer care and staff issues to assist staff in understanding customer needs and being able to deal with them in a professional and personable way. It is particularly important for front line staff or those in direct contact with the public such as HDL and contact centre staff to have appropriate training, but all staff need a general understanding of what it means to provide excellent customer service.

4.3 Information and Access

Information is important to customers. It is particularly important that it is accurate and as detailed as possible. It should include information relating to the full range of services we provide and include how and when people can contact us, and how our services are run. The management of information is part of the Councils Communication strategy/plan. It is not something that is a one-off exercise. It aims to ensure that information is accurate and regularly updated and that information can be easily understood by customers.

The Council has a comprehensive array of methods for making information available so that people have a choice about how they access it. The Council has for some time run a contact centre, where staff are available to take calls from members of the public relating to a range of services. Customers can also have face to face contact with Council staff, through the Halton Direct Link, 'one-stop-shop' facilities, of which there are two in Widnes and two in Runcorn. The Council provides the public with one number to ring to make enquiries about all Council services. This was previously an '08' number and as such was not recognised by mobile phone operators and therefore was disadvantaging those who could only call from a mobile as this is more expensive. The Council have now updated the number so that it is an 03 number, which means that members of the public calling the Council number will now only pay the same as a local 01 number, whether they are calling from a landline or a mobile. This is a good example of how the Council is continuously trying to improve access and reflects their approach to customer services in general.

Additionally, at a corporate level there is the Communications Unit which deals with media releases for example press and radio. They also produce information leaflets and magazines for general release to the public, such as, 'Inside Halton' and 'Know Your Councillor' and 'A List of Council Services', to help inform people about the range of services. These are free publications delivered to local residents. The Council also has internet facilities for staff and customers that hold the same if not more information.

Information can also be translated for those whose first language is not English, or into Braille for people who can access information in this way. Every effort is made to allow access to facilities and information by hard-to-reach groups. The Environmental Health Section of the Council that deals with food hygiene regulations is a particularly good example of this.

In this case, the 'customers' are the food outlet owners and employees whom they inspect. It is estimated that approximately 50% of these fast food outlets are owned and run by people whose first language is not English. To combat this and ensure that the shop owners understand the regulations leaflets are translated into a number of different languages.

However, it was noticed that a number of the ethnic minorities could not read their language, but understood the spoken language. A member of staff suggested that an interactive DVD be made and taken round with a portable DVD player, so that pictures and sound were available to help in translating and understanding the regulations. This has proved very successful with the customers.

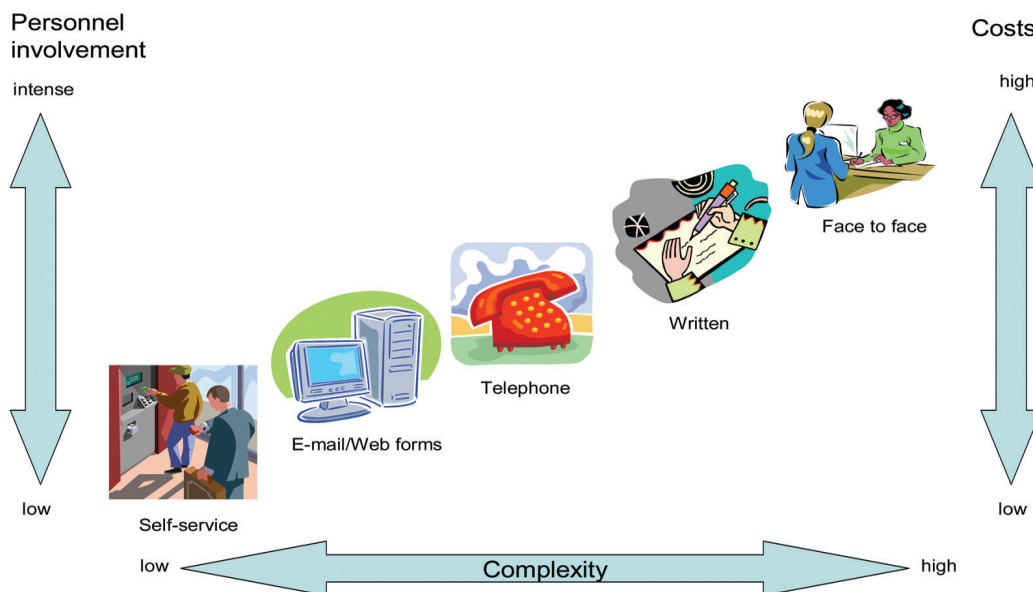
Wherever, possible services work closely with other providers and partners to offer and supply co-ordinated services such as the Children and Young People's Joint Commissioning Strategy Children's Trust. These arrangements have demonstrated benefits for our customers.

Similarly the Revenue and benefits division has co-located with the pension service and established joint visiting, which has led to proven improvements for customers.

The range of methods for delivering services is carefully considered to ensure that customers can access services conveniently and also to ensure the best use of resources. To achieve this, services must focus around the customer needs rather than the service structure.

Access channels (in person, by telephone, by e-mail) and the cost of providing those channels will largely depend on the complexity of the transactions as illustrated in the diagram below:

Diagram 1: Delivery Methods – Analysis of Options



Corporate information is reviewed regularly. The Corporate Plan is comprehensively reviewed every 3 years following considerable customer engagement and consultation. Service Plans are also reviewed annually. In addition the HBC website pages are regularly updated by communication champions.

Internally, services use a number of methods to communicate with their staff, one of the most popular being newsletters. The Council have its own corporate staff newsletter called 'In Touch' and several services produce their own newsletters with information specific to their service. The Children and Young People's Directorate also conduct staff surveys and have awards for employees.

4.4 Delivery

The Council considers it extremely important to look at what is being delivered and to ask the question "Is what is being delivered in line with the Council's core business and priorities?" These priorities are based on the national agenda and local need therefore the outcomes will be important to customers. Additionally, if outcomes are not being achieved or if there are problems there needs to be a clearly defined way to deal with these.

The Corporate Plan does this at a strategic level by involving customers in its creation through consultation. It is important therefore that corporate priorities are carried out to the highest possible standard in order to deliver against any promised standards, such as above (see p 12 last paragraph). Any dips or changes from the promised standards should be identified and explained to customers along with the action being taken to put things right and prevent further re-occurrence.

The Council has a number of challenging standards for its main services in the form of National and local performance indicators. There is a system of quarterly monitoring that takes place in relation to service planning, which would highlight customer service standards where appropriate.

In addition a number of services undertake their own monitoring, sometimes on a monthly basis. Benchmarking with other authorities is also a popular way for services to check their standards. However, involving customers in setting, reviewing and raising standards can prove problematic in some areas. Some standards are dictated by central government or other national bodies such as the Health and Safety Executive or the Environment agency, so there is little or no flexibility for customers to set these standards. However, it is possible for more generalised standards, were the Council can agree from the outset what customers can expect from the services provided.

Research shows that on the whole people are satisfied with their dealings with the Council; however, this could be better. The level of satisfaction with Council Services was 55% in 2003/04 and has risen to 58% in 2006/07. It is important that if problems occur they are acknowledged and action taken to

correct them. This links to the issue of culture, in that staff should be supported and empowered to deal with problems.

Research also shows that admitting to and learning from mistakes and putting them right is an important way for public services to gain trust from their customers. Listening to and asking for comments and using feedback such as complaints and making adjustments as a result is important.

4.5 Timeliness and Quality

Quality of information has already been addressed but in this instance it refers more readily to the overall standards of a Customer Service Strategy. The standards by which the Council and its partners as a whole promise to interact with their customers. This plays a major part in developing the customer-focused approach required. It is known from research that the speed of initial contact with the customer and keeping to agreed timescales is vital, but speed must not be at the expense of quality.

There are a number of corporate initiatives that have standards relating to timeliness and quality of service such as the corporate complaints procedure. And a number of services have obtained awards, which have required them to demonstrate good customer service such as ISO Awards, Investors in People, Charter Marks and others. In addition, the councils contact centre and Direct Link shops try to ensure that a customers needs are met at the first point of contact and that the customer is informed about the next steps and given an indication of the likely overall time to achieve the outcomes. This is an important area and an area that the Council needs to develop by setting a number of corporate standards.

5.0 WHERE DO WE WANT TO BE AND WHAT OUTCOMES DO WE WANT TO DELIVER?

The primary aim of this strategy is to improve our Customer services in line with the Customer Service Excellence Standard, produced by the Cabinet Office in February this year, (2008).

5.1 Customer insight – Customer Identification, Engagement and Consultation and Customer Satisfaction

The Council wants to ensure that it:

- has an in depth understanding of the characteristics of our current and potential customer groups based on recent and reliable information.
- has developed customer insight about our customer groups to better understand their needs and preferences
- makes particular efforts to identify hard to reach and disadvantaged groups and individuals and have developed our services in response to their specific needs.
- has a strategy for engaging and involving customers using a range of methods appropriate to the needs of identified customer groups.
- have made the consultation of customers integral to continually improving our service and we advise customers of the results and action taken
- regularly reviews strategies and opportunities for consulting and engaging with customers to ensure that the methods used are effective and provide reliable and representative results.
- uses reliable and accurate methods to measure customer satisfaction on a regular basis.
- analyses and publicise satisfaction levels for the full range of customers for all main areas of our service and we have improved services as a result.
- includes our measurement of satisfaction specific questions relating to key areas including those on delivery, timeliness, information, access and the quality of customer service as well as specific questions which are informed by customer insight.
- sets challenging and stretching targets for customer satisfaction and our levels are improving.
- has made positive changes to services as a result of analysing customer experience, including improved customer journeys.

5.2 The Culture of the Organisation - Leadership, Policy and Culture and Staff Professionalism and Attitude

The Council want to ensure that it:

- demonstrates that there is corporate commitment to putting the customer at the heart of service delivery and leaders in our organisation actively support this and advocate for customers
- uses customer insight to inform policy and strategy and to prioritise service improvement activity

- has policies and procedures which support the right of all customers to expect excellent levels of service
- ensures that all customers and customer groups are treated fairly and this is confirmed by feedback and the measurement of customer experience
- protects customers privacy both in face to face discussions and in the transfer and storage of customer information
- empowers and encourage all employees to actively promote and participate in the customer focused culture of our organisation
- can demonstrate our commitment to developing and delivering customer focused services through our recruitment, training and development policies for staff.
- staff are polite and friendly to customers and have an understanding of customer needs.
- prioritise customer focus at all levels of our organisation and evaluate individual and team commitment through the performance management system.
- can demonstrate how customer facing staff's insight and experience is incorporated into internal processes, policy development and service planning.
- values the contribution our staff make to delivering customer focused services, and leaders, managers and staff demonstrate these behaviours

5.3 Information and Access – Range of Information, Quality of Information, Access, Co-operative working with other providers, partners and communities

The Council wants to ensure it:

- makes information about the full range of services we provide available to our customers and potential customers, including how and when people can contact us, how our services are run and who is in charge
- tells our customers how much they have to pay
- provides our customers with the information they need in ways which meet their needs and preferences, using a variety of appropriate channels
- takes reasonable steps to make sure our customers have received and understood the information
- provides an improved range, content and quality of verbal, published and web based information to ensure it is relevant and meets the needs of customers
- can demonstrate that information we provide to our customers is accurate and complete, and that when this is not the case we advise customers when they will receive the information they requested
- makes our services easily accessible to all customer through provision of a range of alternative channels
- evaluates how customers interact with the organisation through access channels and we use this information to identify possible service improvements and offer better choices

- ensures that where customers can visit our premises in person facilities are as clean and comfortable as possible
- has made arrangements with other providers and partners to offer and supply co-ordinated services, and these arrangements have demonstrable benefits for our customers
- has developed co-ordinated working arrangements with our partners that ensure customers have clear lines of accountability for quality of service
- interacts within wider communities and we can demonstrate the ways in which we support those communities

5.4 Delivery Standards - Delivery Standards, Achieved Delivery and Outcomes, Dealing Effectively with Problems

The Council wants to ensure it:

- has challenging standards for our main services, which take account of our responsibility for delivering national and statutory standards and targets
- monitors and meets our standards, key departmental and performance targets and we tell our customer about our performance
- consults and involves customers, citizens, partners and staff on setting, reviewing and raising of our local standards
- agrees with our customers at the outset what they can expect from the service we provide
- can demonstrate that we deliver the service we promised to individual customers and that outcomes are positive for the majority of our customers
- can demonstrate that we benchmark our performance against complementary organisations and have used that information to improve our service
- has developed and learned from best practice identified within and outside our organisation and we publish our examples externally where appropriate
- has identified any dips in performance against our standards and explain these to customers together with action we are taking to put things right and prevent further recurrence
- has an easy to use complaints procedure which includes a commitment to deal with problems and fully solve them wherever possible within a reasonable time limit
- it gives staff training and guidance to handle complaints and to investigate them objectively and we can demonstrate that we empower staff to put things right
- learns from any mistakes we make by identifying patterns in informal and information complaints and comments from customers and use this information to improve services and publicise action taken
- regularly reviews and improves our complaints procedure taking account of the views of customers, complainants and staff
- ensures that the outcome of the complaint process for customers is satisfactory for them

5.5, Timeliness and Quality of Service – Standards for Timeliness and Quality, Timely Outcomes, Achieved Timely Outcomes

The Council wants to ensure it:

- sets appropriate and measurable standards for the timeliness of response for all forms of customer contact including phone calls, letters, e communications and personal callers
- sets comprehensive standards for all aspects of the quality of customer service to be expected in all dealings with our organisation
- advises our customers and potential customers about our promises on timeliness and quality of customer service
- identifies individual customer needs at the first point of contact with us and ensure that an appropriate person can address the reason for contact deals with the customer
- promptly shares customer information with colleagues and partners within our organisation whenever appropriate and can demonstrate how this has reduced unnecessary contact for customers
- discusses with the customer the next steps and indicates the likely overall time to achieve the outcomes, where service is not completed at the first point of contact
- responds to initial enquiries promptly, If there is a delay advise the customer and take action to rectify the problem
- monitors performance against standards for timeliness and quality of customer service and we take action if problems are identified
- is meeting our current standards for timeliness and quality of customer service and we publicise our performance against these standards
- performance in relation to timeliness and quality of service compares well with that of similar organisations

6.0 MOVING FORWARD

A great deal of positive work has already been done by the Council to try and understand who our customers are, and who our potential customers might be, and to provide the sort of high level standards of service excellence that customers expect; through polite, friendly and well informed staff.

Care is being taken to provide quality information across a range of services and to make sure services are as accessible as possible to the local community. Such access is not just physical, in terms of location or wheelchair access, but also includes various other access channels, from letters and face to face transactions through to access via the telephone and internet. There is also the provision to translate leaflets into languages other than English, or into Braille. This helps to reach a wider range of people, including those classed as 'hard-to reach groups'.

A number of services also demonstrate how good their services are through production of performance information, inspections and the achievement of regionally or nationally recognised awards.

However, whilst a great deal of positive work is taking place to try and consult with and engage customers or potential customers there are still things to be done to continue to improve customer services.

There is a need to further investigate share good practice throughout the Council, especially in relation to the corporate approach. There is a risk that services may be acting in silos and not benefiting from a more corporate approach to customers service excellence through the sharing of good practice, and the possibility that if a service is doing something independently there may be inconsistencies in relation to a corporate approach where one exists.

It is important to consider customer characteristics, needs and preferences and to have a consistent approach to consultation and engagement from which to shape service design and delivery. Corporate elements of customer service excellence need to be clarified to form a consistent basis to ensure that there is greater understanding and knowledge of what does exist in terms of strategies, policies, plans and other documentation that could provide the guidance necessary to form a consistent approach to customer service. Currently, not everyone is clear about corporate approaches or strategies that relate to, or have some impact on, customer focus and customer service excellence. This may be partly due to the fact that whilst a great deal of information does exist corporately in written format, it may be out of date, moreover, some policies and plans appear to be intrinsic ways of working rather than specific written documents. Again this can lead to inconsistency and confusion about the corporate approach. Furthermore, services may be missing out on the opportunity to work with another service or partner over a similar issue, which could potentially lead to a waste of resources.

More importantly, acting independently can result in over consultation or duplication of engagement of the same set of customers. Where consultation and engagement does take place it is not clear that there is a consistent approach, especially to feedback.

It is also necessary to ensure customers are satisfied with what is produced and that information is timely, accessible and of good quality. The standard should also be

clearly supported from the top and be backed up by policies and procedures that treat all customers fairly.

It may be that there are pockets of customer service excellence in individual services and directorates that operate at a standard higher than that of the corporate approach. There is a need to develop awareness of existing information and customer service excellence standards and share them both up and down the organisation although the Corporate Plan does state, under the priority of Corporate Effectiveness and Efficient Service Delivery, Area of Focus number 32, that the Council with its partners aims to: "Build on our customer focus by improving communication, involving more service users in the design and delivery of services, and ensuring equality of access", which goes a long way to supporting the fundamental principals on which to build customer service excellence.

High levels of staff professionalism will also be required, which can only be built from a good knowledge base and training. It will be necessary to ensure that all staff are clear about the new standards. This will require good promotion and a number of training initiatives, for all staff, and Members. How we measure the success of all this will also be important.

Last but not least it will be important that full advantage is taken of new technology, especially in the area of access. It would be useful to ensure that where possible software can be joined up to get the most economic and efficient benefit.

The Action Plan below is designed to compound existing good practice and develop new ways to ensure continuous improve on current levels of customer service.

7.0 ACTION PLAN

Action No.	Action	Key Tasks	Lead Officer or Group	Timescale	Resource
1.	Demonstrate leadership support for the development of a customer focused approach to customer service	<p>Development of a Corporate Customer Services Strategy</p> <p>Approval of (final) draft of Customer Services Strategy by Corporate Services PPB/Executive Board</p> <p>Briefing sessions for Divisional Managers to explain the process by which the Council is seeking accreditation and why.</p> <p>Development of customer service 'champions' in each directorate/division to promote the process</p> <p>Information on customer Services approach to become a regular part of Core and Team Briefings</p>	<p>Members/COMT with support of Members Scrutiny Topic Group and Officer Review Group</p> <p>Strategic Directors</p> <p>Strategic Directors/Divisional Managers</p> <p>COMT/Divisional/Team Managers</p>	<p>September 2008 – March 2009</p> <p>March 2009</p> <p>December 2008- March 2009</p> <p>April 2009</p> <p>April 2009</p>	<p>From existing Resources</p> <p>From existing Resources</p> <p>From existing Resources</p> <p>From existing Resources</p>
2.	Establish the current capabilities of the Council in relation to customer service excellence through a corporate assessment. (This will provide a baseline against which to measure and gain accreditation for other services)	<p>Carry out an initial assessment of several divisions against the Customer Service Excellence Standard to establish corporate and divisional elements of CSE.</p> <p>Two service areas (HDL and Benefits) to assess themselves against the corporate baseline</p>	<p>Officer Review Group</p> <p>HDL /Benefits Manager with Officers Group</p>	<p>September 2008 – November 2008</p> <p>December 2008 - March 2009</p>	<p>From existing Resources</p> <p>From existing resources.</p>

7.0 ACTION PLAN

Action No.	Action	Key Tasks	Lead Officer or Group	Timescale	Resource
3.	Prepare a brief/ specification for a CSE accreditation company	Undertake a benchmarking exercise with another similar authority that has obtained or is working towards a corporate approach to the Standard	Officers Group	January – March 2009	From existing resources.
4.		Seek approval from Corporate Services PPB/Executive Board Obtain quotes and appoint a company	Officer Group/ Members Topic Group	January – March 2009	From existing resources.
4.	Prepare for corporate Assessment	Seek corporate assessment and evaluate outcome and report to Corporate Services PPB/Exec Board	Officer Group with support of senior managers/ divisional managers and CSE champions	April - June 2009	From existing resources.
5.		Seek accreditation for HDL/Benefits Services		July – August 2009	From existing resources.
5.	Prepare for service accreditations.	Assess the outcome of accreditation of the first two service areas and develop a roll out plan for the Council to achieve accreditation across other service areas.	HDL/Benefits Managers with support of senior managers/ divisional managers and CSE champions	September 2009	From existing resources.
		Organise self assessments within their relevant directorate.		October 2009	From existing resources.
				CSE champions	November 2009 onwards

7.0 ACTION PLAN

Action No.	Action	Key Tasks	Lead Officer or Group	Timescale	Resource
5.	Review current corporate strategies, policies, plans and other documents that have relevance to customer service	Ensure strategies and other documentation is relevant and up to date and that any action plans are being progressed and monitored	Officer Review Group	December 2008 – Feb 2009	From existing resources
6.	Develop a set of corporate guidelines in relation to defining customer characteristics and engaging conducting surveys, engaging with customers and feeding back to customers	<p>Promote the use of corporate Research and Intelligence Unit information in order to develop consistent corporate customer profiles.</p> <p>Create an internet site with CSE information e.g. guidelines, documentation etc.</p> <p>Develop and promote the use of the Halton Observatory as a repository for information particularly from partners to ensure consistency with partners</p>	<p>CSE champions with support from Research and Development Unit</p> <p>CSE champions with support from research and development unit</p>	<p>January 2009 onwards</p> <p>January 2009 onwards</p>	<p>From existing resources</p> <p>From existing resources</p>
7.	Establish a methods for sharing good practice across the Council	Establish a CSE network	CSE champions with support from senior managers	April 2009 onwards	From existing resources
8.	Develop a set of corporate Customer Service Standards	Research existing standards used by other authorities or recommended as good practice by professional bodies and create a set of standards.	Officer Group	December 2008 – January 2009	From existing resources

7.0 ACTION PLAN

Action No.	Action	Key Tasks	Lead Officer or Group	Timescale	Resource
9.	Take advantage of new technology	Consult with staff and customers regarding the standards and come to an agreed set. Investigate the potential for improving information management and access	Officer Group and Research and Intelligence Unit Officer Group with HDL, IT and Communications	January – March 2009 April 2009 onwards	From existing resources From existing resources
10.	Investigate the need for training in Customer Service Excellence	Establish the need for and type of customer service training required by partners, Members, officers and other staff (front line and back office) in order to ensure a consistent approach to customer service.	CSE Champions and Corporate Training Section	April 2009 onward	From existing resources