

Report to Cabinet

Subject: Customer Promise

Date: 24 January 2023

Author: Head of Governance and Customer Services

Wards Affected

All Wards

Purpose

To inform Members of the work Customer Services have undertaken to improve customer engagement and seek approval of an updated Customer Promise.

Key Decision

This is not a key decision.

Recommendation

THAT Cabinet:

- 1) Notes the work undertaken by Customer Services to improve customer engagement.
- 2) Approves the Customer Promise at Appendix 1 for publication on the Council's website.

1 Background

1.1 Members may recall that as part of the Council's Annual Statistical Complaints report on 6 October 2022, reference was made to a review of the Council's Customer Promise. This review was part of the Customer Services, service plan and an integral part of the teams' ambitions to improve customer engagement and experience with the Council.

- 1.2 Customer engagement continues to be a priority of the Council moving into the new Gedling Plan, and effective customer service is key to this. Actions in the current Gedling Plan relating to customer engagement include the following:
- reducing poverty and inequality and providing support to the most vulnerable,
 - improving the customer experience of engaging with the Council; and
 - reducing loneliness and isolation.
- 1.3 Covid-19 saw a shift in the way customers interacted with the Council as customers looked to engage with the Council through alternative channels predominantly via digital channels or on the telephone. Covid-19 also provided customer services with an opportunity to engage with some of our most vulnerable residents through humanitarian response, and this provided useful insight into the needs of some of our most vulnerable and hard to reach customers.
- 1.4 Following on from the Covid response, Customer Services reviewed service delivery and in particular the provision of the Carlton Hub at Carlton Police Station which had to cease during the pandemic but which prior to the pandemic received limited engagement. It was recognised that whilst customer interaction had largely shifted from face to face during the pandemic, there were still residents who needed face to face service provision and in particular those requiring face to face support were those unable to access online services and those in most need of support to access services.
- 1.5 Working with neighbourhood co-ordinators, voluntary groups and communities, and looking at postcode data from face to face visits, including accessibility to Council offices from different geographical locations, Customer Services established the need for continued “hub” provision or outreach support in various locations in the borough, and in December 2021 rolled out a programme of outreach support sessions around the borough.
- 1.6 Customer Services sought to co-locate these sessions with other organisations who already had established links with the community for example through job fairs, food hubs or community centres. Customer Services has now established a weekly outreach support session in Carlton at the former Carlton Methodist Church working with the Hope Charity and Carlton foodbank. In addition, monthly sessions were provided at the Core Centre in Calverton (this has recently increased to weekly) and one off sessions have been provided at Newstead Village Hall, Killisick Community centre and more regularly at the Ark in Gedling.

- 1.7 Feedback from the outreach sessions has been positive and demand for the service has grown with two advisers now required at Carlton and Calverton hubs. Over the last year Customer services have seen and advised 480 residents at outreach sessions. The support provided has ranged from benefit and debt advice, advice on grant entitlement, housing advice, help with council tax payments, sign-posting to other services such as Age Concern and the Carer's Hub as well as providing residents with access to the Household Support Fund, a County Council grant fund administered by the districts.
- 1.8 The Household Support Fund was created to help with the cost of living crisis and the scheme provides immediate financial aid to residents in the form of food and fuel vouchers. Approximately 300 referrals for the fund were made in the last year through outreach sessions and working closely with organisations linked to the outreach sessions.
- 1.9 The outreach sessions have also enabled referrals to the Warm homes and Disabled Facilities Grants. New relationships with Age UK, The Green Doctor, Shareware and the Ark have been formed which has given Customer Services the ability to improve support to residents. It has enabled Customer Services to provide a more robust wrap around support service where residents benefit from multiple services but only have to visit the Council once.
- 1.10 The roll out of agile working and associated IT equipment has enabled the outreach hubs to be delivered without any "down time" so if a particular session is quieter, advisers have the facility to revert to the phones or respond to online queries. In addition, as Customer Services now operates an appointments system, residents who live close to an outreach hub can have their face to face appointment booked at the outreach hub rather than having to travel to the Council offices.
- 1.11 Customer Services have now started to capture footfall data from the outreach sessions and data about the services requested at the sessions. This will enable Customer Services to understand the needs of residents at outreach sessions and will also provide more measurable outputs from the sessions.
- 1.12 In addition to the outreach hubs, Customer Services have created a self-serve area in the Council offices and are working with customers to improve digital skills. There are plans to improve this further in 2023 with the introduction of webchat which provides a range of additional functions for customer access, including translation services and video chat, and with the recent appointment of a Digital and Training officer in Customer Services who is tasked with improving digital access to services.
- 1.13 Running throughout the ongoing Customer engagement work is the need to deliver on the Council's Equality Framework and Action Plan. It is

recognised that accessibility is key and to support this Customer feedback is sought from all customers including the request for the provision of equality data to help us shape our services. In addition, all Customer Services staff have undertaken equality training and specific training on Mental health awareness in the context of customer service provision.

- 1.14 In order to provide clarity to our customers about our service provision the Customer Promise was reviewed in October 2022 and was launched for consultation with staff through national Customer Services week. The new promise incorporated some of the existing promise but is more concise, written in plain English and sends a clear message to customers as to how they will be treated. It supports our commitment to accessibility and improved engagement.
- 1.15 This piece of work comes following the approval by Cabinet in December 2022 of the new Unacceptable Customer Behaviour Policy. That policy provides support for staff dealing with difficult customers and sets out what behaviour will not be accepted. The Customer Promise is for the customer to understand how they can expect to be treated by the Council and sets the standards by which interactions can be measured.
- 1.16 The Institute of Customer Services has produced a document outlining trends and predictions for Customer Services in 2023. This document, along with other information gathered by Customer services in 2022 will support the creation of a Customer Services Strategy document for 2023/24 to support service planning and the Gedling plan. The Institute of Customer Services references the following in its predictions for 2023:
- “Organisations will need to maintain a clarity of purpose and be realistic about their core proposition, how they will service different types of customer and the levels of service they can sustain. They will also need to demonstrate empathy, understanding, flexibility and transparency in their communication - especially when dealing with customers who are vulnerable, or whose personal circumstances have been impacted by growing financial pressures. Organisations will be expected to be proactive in helping customers manage the rising cost of living.”*
- 1.17 What is clearly identified in the predictions for 2023 is that there is a balance to be struck between digitalisation and an ongoing need to support all our residents effectively. Whilst face to face services are often seen as outdated, and artificial intelligence and digitalisation the route perhaps to true efficiency, what Customer Services have learned from Covid-19, and from talking to residents, is that effective customer service has to be accessible by all, only then can the Council effectively deliver services and fulfil the Council’s motto of Serving People, Improving Lives.

- 1.18 Whilst to many residents engagement with the Council is preferably minimal and transactional, there are so many other residents who need more than this. The outreach programme attempts to overcome barriers to accessing services such as geography, mobility, health restrictions (physical and mental), literacy, IT skills, and cost, to ensure that as many of our residents as possible are getting the services they need and are entitled to. The Customer Promise is the overarching promise of how as a Council we will engage with our customers in a way that they understand and to which the Council can be held to account.

2 Proposal

- 2.1 It is proposed that Cabinet note the contents of the report in respect of the work undertaken and planned, to improve Customer engagement, and that the Customer Promise is supported for publication. If supported, all staff will be briefed on the new Customer Promise.

3 Alternative Options

- 3.1 An alternative Customer Promise could be considered, however this document has been circulated to all staff and Senior Leadership Team for comment and is considered to be fit for purpose.

4 Financial Implications

- 4.1 There are no direct financial implications arising out of this report. The locations of the outreach hubs have been identified on the basis there is no charge to the Council for using the facilities but the benefits to the groups using those locations is significant. As indicated in the report, there is no “downtime” at the outreach sessions as staff have the equipment to be able to revert to online and phone queries remotely. All work undertaken is met from within existing budgets.

5 Legal Implications

- 5.1 There is no legal requirement to provide a Customer Promise, however, it does support the provisions of standards to which the Council can be measured when dealing with complaints or queries.

6 Equalities Implications

- 6.1 The Customer Promise and other work undertaken by Customer Services supports the Council's Equality Policy, Framework and Action Plan and has an overall positive impact on those who may have difficulty accessing Council Services for a variety of reasons. The work aims to improve customer engagement for all.

7 Carbon Reduction/Sustainability Implications

- 7.1 Travel to outreach centres, does have a slight impact in respect of carbon emissions, as staff are required to use their own vehicles which may not be electric. This could be offset by the reduction in travel time the customer needs to make as they can access services locally as opposed to travelling to the Civic Centre.

8 Appendices

- 8.1 Appendix 1 – Customer Promise
Appendix 2 – Customer Services Statistics 2022

9 Background Papers

- 9.1 Institute of Customer Services Trends and Predictions 2023

10 Reasons for Recommendations

- 10.1 To update the Executive on the work undertaken by Customer Services to improve customer engagement and to seek support for a new Customer Promise.

Statutory Officer approval

Approved by:
Date:
On behalf of the Chief Financial Officer

Approved by:
Date:
On behalf of the Monitoring Officer