

Customer Service and Access Strategy

This document has been reformatted to ensure it is accessible. The content is still as per the 2016 published strategy.

Introduction

This strategy sets out the level of service our customers can expect to receive from the council and how our services can be accessed.

The strategy recognises the financial challenges the Council is facing and supports the Corporate Plan – Delivering for the Community - in particular, its objective of being a sound & self-efficient Council, where quality frontline services will be delivered on time and to the right people, whilst implementing genuine channel shift thereby enabling customers to access key services online.

The customer will remain at the heart of this strategy and whilst there will be a need for changes in the future, we will consider the customer experience and individual needs.

Why have a strategy?

Access to information and services, along with customer satisfaction and experience, are major issues for local government and the public sector. Developing a Customer Service and Access Strategy ensures we:

- focus on our customers and their needs
- engage with a wide range of stakeholders
- assess the way we deliver our services now and, in the future,
- manage change effectively

Customer focus and access is an important cross-cutting theme, and our strategy will consider:

- Improving customer service
- Ensuring accessibility
- Enhancing customer experience
- Reviewing methods of contact and communication
- Targeting resources effectively

Background

The borough of Gravesham is extremely diverse, consisting of a mix of rural and urban areas, covering approximately 99km², with rural spaces making up around 78% of the whole Borough.

With a total population of just over 105,000 Gravesham also has the highest proportion of black and minority ethnic populations across Kent.

Whilst traditionally, Gravesham Borough Council receives the majority of communications by telephone and personal visit, contact via the website and through electronic traffic is growing. The majority of communications are received from

approximately 20% of the community, with the other 80% having infrequent or no direct contact.

Internet access has risen steadily over the years and is set to continue. This, coupled with developments in technology, has resulted in more and more households accessing services online from banking to home delivery shopping.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) publish annual figures for adults in the UK who have recently used internet. The current figure stands at 87.9% of the UK population, a rise of nearly 2% since 2015. However, whilst there is a clear increase in usage across all groups of the UK population, the ONS quote “While we have seen a notable increase in internet usage across all groups in recent years, many older and disabled people are still not online, with two-thirds of women over 75 having never used the internet.”

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2016#main-points>

Our Customers

Gravesham Borough Council considers there to be four specific customer groups which this strategy will focus on. These are:

- High Interactive, for example, housing tenants or benefit claimants, who have regular contact with the council
- Casual interactive, for example, customers who contact the council a couple of times a year to clarify information or request a one-off service such as bulky waste collection
- Low interactive, for example, customers who do not need to contact the council because they have no need, such as those who utilise direct debit facilities for payment of council tax and source information such as changes to refuse collections online
- Business customers for example, those who trade within the Borough, are looking to relocate or set up a new business, or those who provide goods and services to the council.

We also recognise there is a wider group of customers including visitors and those who pass through the Borough.

Actions

There are 4 key areas that will be addressed through this Strategy:

Excellent Customer Service

We will strive to provide excellent customer service at all times. With significant changes ahead, it is likely that we will have less resource to undertake our work and therefore understanding what excellent service means to customers, clearly promoting our performance standards and monitoring achievement will be essential.

Within this area of work, we will:

- Continue the mystery shopping exercises which test our services from the customer's perspective

- Review all feedback, positive and negative and use the information to learn and improve
- Understand what is important to customers and clearly promote our commitments

Service Delivery

Gravesham Borough Council recognises the demand on front services and aims to address this by reviewing the ways in which services are delivered, putting greater emphasis on self-service and availability of information which will help to address peaks in service demand, improve waiting times for customers and enable a more accessible service 24/7.

Within this area of work, we will:

- Continue to develop the website, ensuring a robust strategy is developed to guarantee it is a site customers can use 24/7 to search information and apply for services thereby minimising contact by telephone or personal visit
- Continue to develop methods of engaging customers individually or en masse using social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and other channels to disseminate information and take part in discussions and resolve issues.
- Review opportunities for services to be delivered via the website or other self-service channels, such as automated telephone systems and actively work to introduce them
- Identify services, or parts of services, that will only be delivered by one specific channel in order to directly reduce demand on telephone or face to face channels (although consideration will need to be given to individual circumstances)
- Actively promote and encourage the use of other channels for example signing up to direct debit payments or e-billing

Engagement, Consultation and Equalities

Gravesham Borough Council's approach to consultation, engagement, and equalities has changed over recent years with a long-term strategic approach to wide ranging community cohesion having been introduced.

Engagement with communities is seen as an essential part of our business and understanding our customers and their needs continues to be a high priority. Indeed Gravesham Borough Council's commitment in the Corporate Business Plan is 'Delivering for the Community'.

Gravesham recognises and values the diversity of its community and customers and will work to continually embrace and celebrate the diverse cultures; promote equalities and diversity across all communities within the borough and work with partners to support new and emerging communities to integrate into the borough.

Within this work we will:

- Ensure effective engagement and consultation with all groups of the community, understanding their needs and expectations in relation to customer service and accessibility of service
- Recognise and understand the different needs of groups, for example, the needs of businesses are very different to the needs of residents

- Ensure engagement with minority and vulnerable communities; recognising that some groups of the community will not actively engage, but that effective channels of communication remain open
- Ensure Equality impact assessments are completed for significant changes and new policies to identify any negative impact

Accessibility

Gravesham Borough Council will take a strategic approach to reviewing customer access and ensuring easily accessible services.

Our Accessibility for All procedure identifies some of the barriers experienced in accessing services and the solutions in place to overcome these.

We will work with our community and service users to understand the longer-term vision and aims for how services will be accessed and will ensure improvements through mechanisms such as the website and contact centre.

Gravesham Borough Council is already working in partnership with many organisations and will continue to improve wider access through partnerships such as the Gateway project.

Within this work we will:

- Engage with specific user or advice groups to understand access experiences
- Use findings and feedback to develop and improve specific channels such as website or self-help services to ensure they remain open to all users
- Promote alternative ways of accessing services, for example, assisted self-service through the internet café within the Gravesham Gateway
- Work with partners to provide enhanced services when feasible, for example Gateway partners

Conclusion

This strategy is designed to assist Gravesham Borough Council to move forward during times of challenge and change, to ensure services are delivered effectively and efficiently, whilst meeting the needs of our customers.

This strategy has been developed with involvement from the internal Wider Management Team and key service areas such as Customer Services, Revenues & Benefits, Housing and Finance and is approved by the council's Management Team and Cabinet.