

Customer Access Strategy

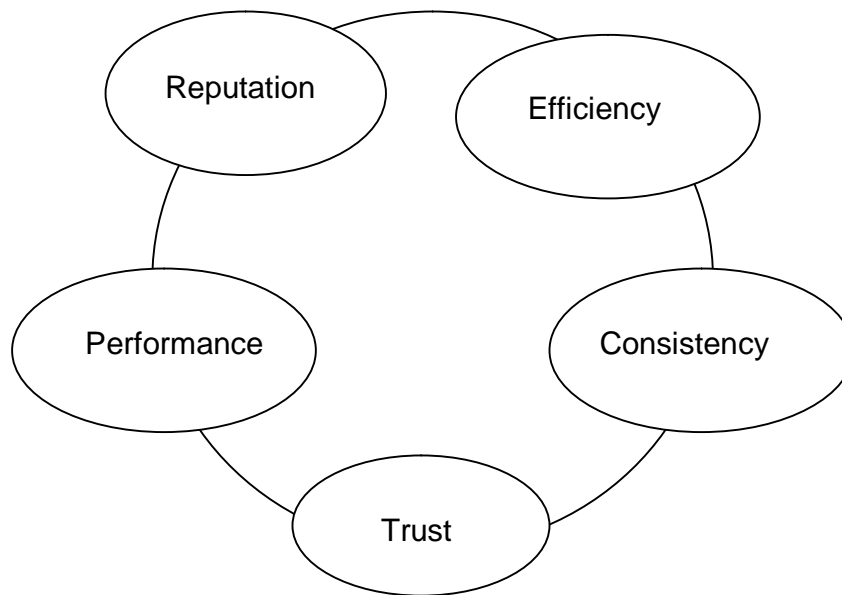
The Customer Access Strategy outlines North Dorset District Council's commitment to improve access to its services. The intention is to make all our services customer/citizen centred, designed to be delivered in ways that are convenient for them and meet their needs.

1. The Vision

The overarching vision of the Council is to:

- improve community and customer responsiveness to enable more and more effective consultation
- improve access to services
- enhance service quality

We desire to follow the model for world class service:



The heart of the Council's ambition is to "improve access to services delivered by the Council and other public sector bodies, by jointly developing information and communication technologies (ICT), with appropriate management process and systems, to help provide straightforward and accessible services to customers when and where they are required, to a consistently high standard".

Customer Access Strategy cont'd

Customers – local government operates in a different context from business, it cannot choose its customers, it exists to serve all the people in an area, not just those who are easy to provide for, or profitable. Some of local government's "customers" will be intensive users of council services. Others will simply pay their council tax and dispose of their rubbish. Some citizens are in receipt of enforcement action. Within finite resources, political decisions need to be taken which may not benefit every group and citizens can vote for a change in leadership. We believe there is much to learn from the private sector about understanding what citizens want and how well we meet the needs of local people.

This district is very rural and in some areas very sparsely populated. The relative wealth of some of the population masks the low incomes and problems of many others. Despite the growth of the numbers living in the area, infrastructure has not kept pace and lack of rural transport is a major problem for both the young and old.

We believe we need to deliver services in the ways in which people find them easiest to use. We need to reduce the need for people to travel to us to obtain services and we need to be able to recognise local differences, different characteristics of market towns, for example.

The Council's Improving Electronic Government (IEG) statements have set out a route map for the Council to improve the accessibility, quality and relevance of services to citizens. In particular IEG2 outlines our "Vision for the District".

Our business transformation programme aims to provide electronic access to the majority of our services reducing the need for the public to travel to our offices in Blandford.

2. Background

The Council has invested £3.2m from its Capital Programme into ICT and this will improve quality, timeliness and accuracy and will bring efficiencies into service delivery. The Council has improved its performance on Electronic service delivery (Best Value Performance Indicator 157) from 10% in April 2003 to 100% in March 2006. The Website has been redeveloped and provides deep links to the Dorset Portal. The Council's Intranet has also been developed, and links to the Customer Relationship Management System enabling staff easier access to information about services.

Implementation of new systems for Customer Relationship Management (CRM), Geographical Information, Electronic Document Management and Record Systems, Licensing, Leisure, Income Management including online payments, Financial Management, Local Land and Property Gazetteer, Performance Management and a combined system for Development Control, Building Control and Land Charges are proceeding. Procurement of systems for Housing and Environmental Health Management has commenced.

Customer Access Strategy cont'd

The Comprehensive Performance Assessment Inspection report into the Council in 2004 stated that "there were some strong positives regarding access, communication and consultation. There has been progress in improving access to services using IT and a new one-stop shop provides assistance on a range of Council Services."

In the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate assessment, it was stated that the service "had a strong focus on customer service demonstrated by the decision to create a front line customer contact team."

The Customer Focus Inspection in 2005 gave the authority one star with a fair rating and promising prospects of improvement. This Strategy is the first step in articulating our approach to customer access. The Inspection report stated that the Council has a clear commitment to Customer Focus and to meeting the needs of all its customers. It recognised that the website was good and that communications to customers were effective. Access to our Leisure Centres and for business customers was praised. The Inspection identified the sparse physical or electronic access to Council services excluding those without IT equipment and also the lack of an access officer as a central point of contact for people with disabilities and these have been addressed.

Currently the vast majority of our customers prefer to contact us by phone and in 2005 we invested in new telephony technology, enabling easier, more effective access to our services. The Council actively uses the telephony technology available to ensure that customers calling regarding a particular 'hot-topic' can be given the information via the queuing message and can abandon their call without having to take up an officer's time. Whilst this does affect the calls abandoned figure, it is more efficient than an officer dealing with that particular call. This is particularly effective at times when there is a high call volume regarding a single issue. The Council uses this technology in conjunction with other access channels, such as the website in order to improve the customer's experience. In the future we need to encourage more of our residents to contact us electronically and we need to inform our approach through the Citizens Panel to identify access needs and set the vision and design of our future access channels.

We aim for Customers to have 80% of their enquiries dealt with at the first point of contact with the same level of service provided irrespective of how or where they contact us. Efficiencies are to be obtained through the promotion of self-service and online transactions through the web.

Customer Access Strategy cont'd

3. Our Key Objectives

To improve customer satisfaction from the existing 59% (Best Value satisfaction survey).

To widen access to Council Service through electronic access and via libraries, Town Councils and other partner organisations – by promoting and setting up systems to monitor usage of these access channels on a monthly basis.

To improve efficiency through increasing customer transactions online - by promoting this method of interaction and monitoring the number of transactions on a monthly basis.

To identify savings from the efficiencies to reduce Council costs - by closely monitoring costs before and after implementation.

To improve efficiency with more enquires being dealt with at the first point of contact and thus reducing interruptions to the specialist and processing staff – by recording the number and type of calls (on a monthly basis) that have to be referred on.

4. Self Service Is the Priority

The first priority is web self-service. In the future our citizens/customers will be able to communicate and transact with the Council 24 hours, 7 days a week, 365 days per year. Self-service has the benefit of providing immediate results. It will enable enquiries, applications, the reporting of changes in circumstances, reporting incidents and payment to be made on line. All of this to happen without the need for staff intervention and this should ultimately help to reduce our costs.

We have increased customer access for those without internet connection; through libraries, community partnership offices, Town and Parish Councils and other partner organisations and have provided training to enable this to happen.

Information management is the essential element in the infrastructure we develop. Access channels are only as good as the information fed into them. Transferring the intellectual knowledge, keeping the information on the web current and user-friendly will be a crucial success factor, together with convincing staff that by giving time to putting all the information and forms on the web, this will free up their time from repeat enquires.

Customer Access Strategy cont'd

5. Customer Interface – Assisted Service

The second priority is to build on the work already commenced to develop the “right first time” approach when contacted by phone or in person at Nordon, the Council Offices in Blandford. This will require extensive staff training and development, a structured approach to recording information and further developing information on the Web and CRM. It will also require the development of frequently asked questions (FAQs) and detailed scripts for enquires.

We have appointed an Access Officer as a central point of contact for people with disabilities.

6. Remote and Home Working For Staff

We have invested in technology enabling our staff to work remotely and carry out visits to deal with more than one issue. This will improve our efficiency and result in fewer journeys in our sparsely populated rural district. Where appropriate we will enable home working to improve efficiency and there will be appropriate controls to ensure data security and management of output. It will also reduce premises requirements.

The first stage has been in Revenues and Benefits with benefit assessors being given the opportunity to work from home to increase productivity; our visiting officers will be able to use hand held electronic devices when they are out in the District giving direct access to our systems enabling them to work more effectively; this will be extended to a benefit adviser enabling benefit entitlement calculations in recipients homes. This will improve access to our services to those customers in the community that have difficulty attending the Council's offices.

In the light of our experience in the Revenues and Benefits Service and as the technology is developed we will develop this approach to other service areas.

7. Cultural Change

We recognise that we need significant cultural change both within the organisation and from our residents to effect e-gov related improvements. We need well-trained and developed teams to deliver our services who recognise that the customer is central to everything we do.

Engagement with our customers is key, increasing understanding of the way services and information are delivered in the future.

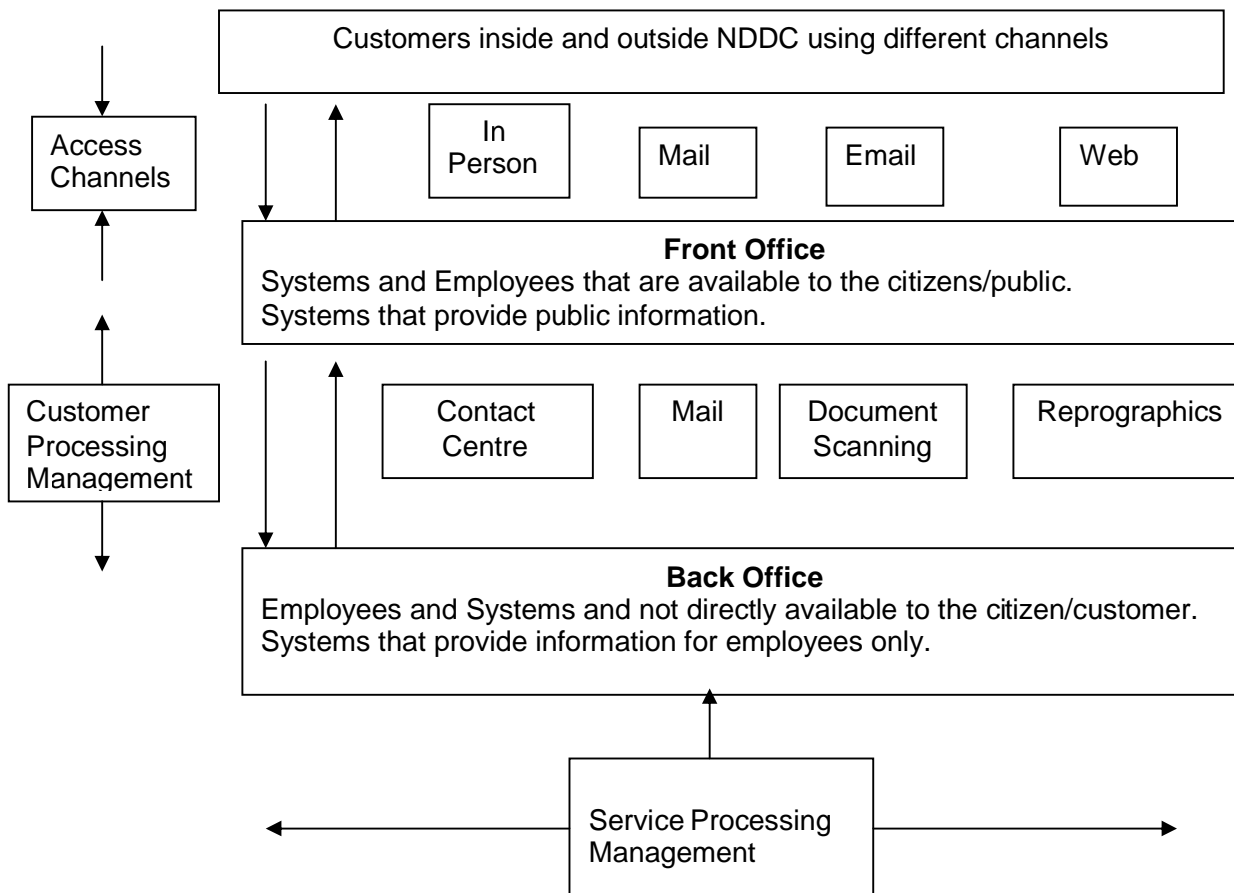
Customer Access Strategy cont'd

The quality of the service provided either via the Web or from the Front Office staff will be pivotal in maintaining confidence and stop the necessity for referrals to the back office and senior managers. The philosophy will involve significant change both in our customers and employees' behaviour.

8. Our Plans for the Future

The business transformation programme will mean that all customer contact with the back office will be managed via the front office. At the heart of this plan is the Customer Relationship Management System (CRM), which will enable the Front Office staff to record details of all customer transactions to support subsequent customer calls. It will also allow information to be shared and distributed within the organisation, to speed the completion of a transaction and offer the opportunities to the customer to follow up on multiple issues in one session without having to be referred.

The Service Model



Customer Access Strategy cont'd

The Front Office Team will be trained to provide services through a comprehensive programme enabling them to deal with:

1. Enquiries about services, applications for service and reporting changes of circumstances and incidents.
2. Registering complaints,
3. Taking payments, either for a charge for a service or for the provision of a service,
4. Promoting the Web to enable greater self- or assisted- service.
5. Undertaking consultations.

The Website contains a significant amount of information about our services. We need to develop its capability to provide up to the minute information on what is happening within the Council, how we are responding to issues and to ensure that it is intuitive and easy to navigate. The improved website will eventually enable online transactions, applications and payments. Where services can be requested, delivered and paid for electronically these will be added to the website.

Document Scanning and Workflow will be implemented enabling electronic management of all our paper transactions. A structured filing architecture will be developed and used consistently throughout the organisation. This will mean a fundamental change to our existing processes and the training of staff in the management of the process. Priority will be given to customer interactions and standards and disciplines introduced to ensure quality, timely and consistent responses.

9. People We Employ

Our aspiration is that we employ a modern workforce with strong professional expertise where needed, encourage people to become highly proficient in IT, with good customer care skills. We would aim to offer a working environment where staff can develop their skills, experience and knowledge and offer opportunity within the Council to progress and provides good accommodation and conditions.

Front Line employees will receive comprehensive training (this will be based on a skills needs analysis) enabling them to deal with 80% of enquiries across the whole range of services. The continuing training and development of staff will be an essential part of achieving our aim of continual improvement.

Increased remote/home working should reduce the number of staff working within the Council Offices because of the improvements in ICT and telephony.

Flexible working to benefit work life balance.

Customer Access Strategy cont'd

We have now created one service area/reception point at the Council Offices in Blandford. This houses the front office staff dealing with face-to-face enquiries

10. Communication and Consultation

Staff will be briefed on the business transformation process and this strategy as it affects them in their individual service areas. We have established a joint member Officer Project Board to manage the process. Members will be briefed in the regular Portfolio Holders reports to Council and by officer report to Cabinet.

There will be full consultation on the strategy through our Community Partners, Town and Parish Councils and with updates on the internet.

Conclusion

The first stage of the transition has been in Revenues and Benefits, we will learn from this process before embarking on further business transformation. Each stage will be project managed and staff and Councillors will be involved at each stage.

This Strategy is a step towards improving access to Council Services and meeting the Vision of the Council.

Approved by Cabinet: 12 April 2007

**Contact Officer: Joyce Guest
Ken Sharpe**

Glossary of terms for the Customer Access Strategy

Electronic Document Management (EDM) is a system for tracking and storing electronic documents and/or images of paper documents. The system enables documents to be filed, retrieved and distributed quickly and efficiently across an organisation. Documents and images are stored securely and comply to authentication standards for electronic documents.

Electronic Document and Records Management (EDRMS), in addition to electronic document management it manages documents throughout their life cycle from creation to destruction. A Document becomes a record when it has been reviewed, approved and locked-down. Once a record, [best-practice](#) and/or legally enforced retention policies can be applied.

Geographic Information System (GIS) an interactive local mapping system which captures, stores, analyses and manages data which is spatially referenced to the earth.

Local Land and Property Gazetteer (LLPG) is a database of all addresses in the District. The database is used by all service areas so updates and amendments are shared instantly. This database is also uploaded to the National Land and Property Gazetteer (NLPG).

Performance Management Software (PMS) is used to assess service areas progress towards achieving predetermined organisational goals.

Information Management (IM) is the collection, management and distribution of [information](#).

Customer relationship management (CRM) manages our relationship with customers, this includes collecting, storing and analyzing customer information and automation of processes and interactions between customers and service requests.