



Durham  
County Council



# Durham County Council

Customer First Strategy

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# Introduction

We want to provide services that are efficient, effective and equitable with staff who feel empowered to make changes to improve what we do, focusing on our customers who are at the heart of everything that we do.

## **Key Aims**

Over the next three years we aim to transform the way that customers access our services and also the services themselves so that they are modern, efficient, effective and customer focused. In doing this we will focus on the development of a culture that supports the effective delivery of customer services throughout our organisation making changes so that we provide the shortest possible route from the customer contacting us to resolution of their issue.

We are aware that our customers' expectations about the way they can access our services are changing. There is demand for faster, easier contact at a time and place that is convenient to them. We need to respond to these expectations by providing modern, efficient and effective services that eliminate inefficiency whilst setting challenging standards and regularly reviewing our performance.

Customer service in its wider sense is the first contact our customers will have with our council therefore it is a hugely important tool in shaping opinions about us and developing our reputation as a high performing organisation.

***This strategy details our vision and main areas of focus, detailing how we will improve customer service delivery meeting the expectations of everyone who comes into contact with us.***



## The Durham Context

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Durham County Council provides services to nearly 500,000 people who live in urban, rural and in some cases isolated areas therefore we aim to provide innovative and a diverse range of customer access opportunities so that everyone who wants to contact the council can do so effectively and easily.

## **Altogether Better Durham**

The new unitary authority was born in April 2009. At this point the former districts and the county council became one organisation delivering a wide range of services to the people of our county. Whilst the Local Government Review process was a significant challenge, bringing different teams of people, systems, cultures and standards together it has also been an opportunity for us to improve what we do by sharing and then delivering best practice across all areas, whilst eliminating inefficiency and therefore reducing cost. It also provides us with an opportunity to explore better joint delivery with our partners, so that customers do not experience the frustration of navigating through the various service providers who contribute to our work. This approach will be extremely important moving forward especially as there are likely to be significant reductions in local Government funding in the future as a result of the forthcoming spending review.

Our work to provide excellent customer services links to all of our corporate priorities as follows:

### **2.1 Altogether Better Council**

Access to Services across Durham was constrained before unitary status by the fact that each District Council together with the County Council operated differently. Bringing this altogether at the single front door will improve access to services for all Durham's customers whilst generating savings through increased efficiency and economies of scale.

### **2.2 Altogether Wealthier**

Customer first will support business development and, perhaps particularly, inward investors by providing a totally competent, approachable 'first face of Durham'. It will support regeneration schemes by engaging at local levels.

### **2.3 Altogether Better for Children and Young People**

We will ensure that we communicate with all ages effectively which will include young people who will demand modern IT based communication channels as they are used to using channels such as facebook and twitter. We will also provide additional support to programmes such as 'Every Child Matters' and 'Putting People First'.



## **2.4 Altogether Safer**

Customer first will support partnership work for example tackling anti-social behavior and signal crime such as graffiti and abandoned vehicles. We will be able to map hot spots through our customer relationship management system and work with colleagues and partners to improve our intelligence regarding these issues, allowing targeting action to be planned.

## **2.5 Altogether Healthier**

Customer first will support council and partner initiatives to increase participation in sport, health and general leisure activities. We will also provide an appropriate level of assistance to the many people qualifying for benefits and support.

## **2.6 Altogether Greener**

Customer first will support initiatives to improve waste diversion and recycling whilst our online reporting arrangements will also enable customers to report litter, graffiti and fly tipping. This will also allow us to target cleaning and enforcement regimes. Our approach will also reduce carbon emissions as customers will be able to communicate with us locally or from their home.

***All of our priorities will benefit from having an effective, efficient and warm customer service culture throughout our organisation.***



# Our Vision for Customer First

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## **Altogether Better Customer Services**

Our vision for customer first is straight forward, we want to provide '*altogether better customer services which place our customers at the heart of everything we do*'.

Whilst our work to provide customer services which meets the expectations of our customers is varied, covering all aspects of what we do, we will focus on the following five themes, which we believe will have the biggest positive impact on the service our customers receive and the overall culture of our organisation:

- 1. Customer insight**
- 2. Organisational culture**
- 3. Information and Access**
- 4. Delivery**
- 5. Quality of service**



# Delivering the Strategy

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## **4.1 Customer Insight**

Understanding and identifying our customers, consulting with them in a meaningful way and effectively measuring the outcomes of our services will be a vital part of our approach in the future. We will undertake residents and service specific surveys so that we understand what our customers feel about what we do. This will be combined with using information gathered from our customer relationship management system following contact with the council in addition to service specific consultation activities to identify customer needs. This work will be closely aligned to our consultation and engagement strategy currently being developed.

Effective customer profiling and insight will enable us to plan service provision to meet the needs of our customers. Where there is dissatisfaction about what we do issues will be identified so that improvements can be made. We will develop a profile of our main customer groups and using relevant software to understand how they are segmented and classified so that we understand their area based needs.

Methods to enable us to further understand the needs of our customers and provide us with comprehensive insight will include the development of focus groups, use of the citizen's panel, one to one interviews, surveys, observation, customer journey mapping and relevant other ways of collecting information about customers.

We will make particular efforts to identify hard-to-reach and disadvantaged groups and individuals and will develop our services in response to their specific needs.

***We will develop plans to continually consult, engage and communicate with our customers using a range of methods appropriate to them whilst our communication will be in their preferred language and format without undue delay.***

***Our methods of consultation will be annually reviewed to ensure that our methods used are effective and that they provide reliable and representative results.***

## **4.2 Organisational Culture**

The council is committed to putting the customer at the heart of everything we do. Whilst it is accepted that the transition to have a customer focused culture embedded throughout our organisation will be challenging we are committed to developing a culture that demonstrates positive behaviours during every contact with our customers.

We will prioritise customer focus at all levels throughout our organisation by embedding this focus within our Organisational Development Strategy and through our induction process. We will evaluate individual and team commitment using our performance management system. We will recognise excellent individual and team performance and hold annual corporate and service grouping events to celebrate achievement. We will also award '***Outstanding for Durham***' certificates to our team throughout the year to recognize outstanding customer service work. These will be awarded by the Chief Executive, Corporate Directors and senior Members of the Council and will be publicised in staff magazines and in the media where appropriate.

We will empower, train and encourage all of our staff to actively promote what we do and feel able to deliver the customer focused culture that we want to provide within our organisation. We will promote this with the adoption of the following six behaviour themes that we will demonstrate from the corporate management team and throughout our organisation:

**Trust:** we keep our promises by delivering what we said we will deliver, when we said we would deliver it, meeting the service standards we have agreed and publicised;

**Honesty:** we are honest, dealing with everyone fairly and transparently;

**In Tune:** we understand the needs of our customers and how they feel about the services we deliver for them. We are good at listening and communicating what we have done and what we will do;

**Working Together:** we take ownership of what we do working together across service areas as one team. We review what we have done and consider how we can improve being empowered to make changes as we go to improve the service offered to our customers;

**Warmth:** we care about what we do and most importantly about our customers who we serve as well as our colleagues. We care passionately about the council and our county and provide a warm, welcoming and friendly service when communicating with our customers whilst also supporting our teams across the council;

**Empower:** our staff make a difference by taking personal responsibility for delivering excellent customer service that exceeds the expectations of our customers.

## **4.3 Information and Access**

We aim to provide our customers with the information they need in ways that meet their needs and preferences, using a variety of access channels which we will widely communicate so that there is awareness of these facilities. These will include a website that is regularly updated maximising self service reporting, payment, registration and information for those who feel comfortable contacting us using this facility. We will also provide a diverse range of other communication mediums such as telly talk, digital tv reporting, mobile telephone services, links using 'twitter' in addition to access points which will be situated throughout our county. Our customer contact centres will be improved so that we maximise the use of our resources and technology.

The information we will publish will be simple to understand meeting the needs of our customers. We will regularly review the data and content to ensure that it is accurate and relevant and monitor the views of our customers regarding how easy it is to contact us and receive information. Our evaluation of our access channels for customers to use will allow us to identify future service improvements and therefore offer better choices.

We will ensure that when our customers visit us they will experience consistent service delivery and that our access points will be standardised offering clean, comfortable, attractive layouts that positively impact on the reputation of our organisation. We will make arrangements to promote the work of our partners i.e. Police regarding Anti-Social Behaviour plans, on our website and at our access points whilst also encouraging them to provide information on our work using their access channels.

***Our customers will be able to access council services at a time that is convenient to them whilst they will not encounter 'barriers' to service delivery or access due to age, disability, gender, race, religion/belief or sexual orientation.***

***We will deliver a 'tell us once' culture where customers can have their issue resolved at their first point of contact whilst access to the council can be made at a time convenient to them through access facilities that they are comfortable to use.***



## **4.4 Delivery**

We are aware that research has shown that many customers are satisfied with the outcome of their contact with public services although fewer are satisfied with the way the service kept promises and managed any problems. We will promote a culture where we get it right first time and meet our customers' expectations regarding communicating with them during and then once the issue they have reported to us has been resolved as we know this is an area where we can improve.

We will listen, ask for comments and feedback about what we have done and monitor complaints about our service before making adjustments where necessary to the way our organisation operates so that we can improve our service delivery to customers.

We will set challenging customer service standards for our services which will take into account our responsibility for delivering national and statutory standards and targets.

We will monitor and meet our standards and key service grouping performance targets whilst telling our customers about how we perform. We will consult and involve our customers, citizen panels, partners and our team on the setting reviewing and raising of our local standards. We will develop a customer service charter that will be adopted for use across our organisation that will be explicit about the standards our customers can expect to experience when contacting us. The charter will be regularly reviewed to reflect the changing needs of our customers and the opportunities that we will have in the future to improve delivery due to the improved use of technology.

We will give our team training and guidance to manage complaints and encourage them to investigate these objectively whilst we will empower staff to put things right quickly to minimise negative performance delivery. We will learn from mistakes we make by identifying patterns in formal and informal complaints and comments from our customers and use this information to improve services.

***We will shape our services in the future so that they are lean, modern and effective demonstrating value for money whilst removing duplication and excessive administration which impacts negatively on our customers.***



## **4.5 Quality of Service**

We already set measurable standards for the timeliness of response for complaints and freedom of information/EIR requests although we will extend this to cover all forms of customer contact including phone calls, e-communications and personal callers. We will advise our customers via our customer charter about our promises about the timeliness of our responses and the quality of service they can expect to receive.

We will monitor our performance in relation to timeliness and quality of service we provide with that of similar organisations through benchmarking and consider how we can make improvements where necessary.

We will assess our customer service performance against the national Customer Service Excellence Standard and seek formal accreditation to demonstrate our compliance and that we are doing what we need to do to improve delivery.

***We will continually assess the performance of our services and the impact that they have on our customers in delivering what they require in an efficient, effective and responsive way.***

# Summary 5



## **The Way Forward**

Durham County Council operates a diverse range of services for customers who live in urban, rural and in some cases in isolated areas of the county. Our customers have diverse needs. Our aim is to provide a variety of access channels and customer first standards that meet their expectations. We will eliminate inefficiency and work towards a culture where we provide the shortest possible route from the customer reporting an issue to us to the issue being resolved. We know that we have excellent, warm and committed staff who we will empower to improve what we do so that we are able to resolve issues at the first point of contact whilst delivering effective services making the best use of technology.

We understand that there is likely to be a reduction in funding for the council to use in the future therefore we want to maximise value for money by adopting a philosophy of looking for the shortest route to resolve issues and improve delivery whilst delivering savings and providing opportunities to improve what we do.

We will review this strategy annually and make changes accordingly so that we can maximise all opportunities to improve what we do.

***An action plan will be developed through our corporate improvement programme to further develop our main themes so that we can be assured regarding delivery.***





Please ask us if you would like this document summarised in another language or format.

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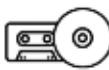
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