

# Customer Access Strategy

Southwark Council

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# 1 – Executive Summary

## Introduction

This strategy sets out Southwark Council's new approach to the way we will deliver services to local residents in the future. By improving the way customers access council services, we have the opportunity to both improve the quality of the customer experience in Southwark and make significant savings. This will mean changing the nature of our relationship with the citizen, investing in new technology and clearly communicating the change with both council staff and local residents. This document explains our vision for customer services and sets out a clear road map for delivering it.

## Context

This strategy has been developed in the context of a major change in the way we deliver our customer services. In May 2012, we announced that we would be bringing our customer service contract with Vangent under in-house control, starting from 1 June 2013. At the time, Councillor Peter John, Leader of the Council, stated that:

*“Our vision for customer services is to treat every resident as a valued member of the family and we believe that having the responsibility for service delivery will help us to achieve this more quickly. We believe this is the right course of action to take if we are to deliver a new approach to customer service that also delivers value for money in the current tough economic climate.”*

In transitioning this service back to the council, it is important that we have a clear strategy for the way we want the service to be delivered in the future. Since the front-facing services covered by the contract were last delivered by the council in 2005 the world has changed significantly with new technologies and changing customer expectations meaning that a fresh approach is required. The changed financial climate in local government also means that we have to look again at everything we do and find cheaper, more efficient ways of delivering services.

## The strategy

This strategy sets out the following strategic principles that we will focus on as we deliver improvements to our customer services:

**Taking responsibility for customer service** because an efficient, effective local authority relies on customer focus being embedded at all levels of the organisation

**Getting it right first time** because customers rightly expect that basic enquiries can be resolved correctly at the first point of contact

**Digital by default** because the spread of the internet and mobile technology has presented new opportunities for delivering services more effectively and at lower cost

**Treating everyone with respect** because we have committed to treating our residents as we would want members of our own family to be treated.

## 2 – Background and context

The development of a Customer Access Strategy is timely given the number of both local and national factors impacting on the council and the way it delivers services.

### **National context**

Across the private and public sector, the spread of new technology has challenged old models of service delivery. Customers and service users are now able to access information at the touch of a button, often whilst on the move, meaning that more traditional methods of delivering simple transactional services have become outdated. Carefully designed online services are quick and easy to use, available whenever and wherever customers wish to access them and can have significantly lower administrative costs compared to other access channels. This strategy sets out our approach to the growing number of channels through which residents can access services and explains how we will ensure that these channels are as cost effective as possible.

The financial climate within which the council now operates is also a significant driver of our approach. Government funding to Southwark Council was reduced by £33.7m in 2011/12 and a further £16.7m in 2012/13 meaning that significant savings have had to be found from across all council services. As well as enhancing the customer experience, the strategy must also reduce the waste and duplication that results from poor customer service in order to support the delivery of these savings.

### **Local context**

There are also a number of local factors within Southwark which are driving the development of this new strategy. The council is taking back direct control of its customer services when the contract with Vangent ends on 1 June 2013, which will significantly change the way in which we interact with local residents. Over the past seven years, Vangent has handled customer contact on behalf of the council and made significant strides in modernising and streamlining service delivery, as well as providing skills and knowledge transfer to council staff. Bringing the management of these services back under direct council management will bring the front and back office closer together and enable further progress to be made in streamlining end to end processes.

Unlike many local authorities, Southwark retains direct management of its housing stock which means that residents often need to contact the council. Southwark Council is the largest local authority social landlord in London, with 39,000 social rent homes and 15,000 homeowners living in council property, meaning that we receive a high number of contacts from residents wishing to report housing repairs or pay rent. This means that levels of contact with the council will remain high, whichever channels people use to access services.

It is also important to recognise that Southwark is hugely diverse urban borough, which presents its own challenges and opportunities when delivering customer services. According to figures released by the ONS from the 2011 Census, Southwark had a population of approximately 288,300 in March 2011. It is an area of great diversity, with areas of affluence alongside more deprived ones. The borough's residents will have specific needs and preferences as to how they would wish to contact the council, which need to be considered as part of this strategy. However, Southwark's location in inner London means it is blessed with high levels of

broadband internet, wireless internet and mobile phone coverage which will support the drive to deliver more services online.

### **Our customers**

Southwark residents will contact the council for a host of reasons, whether as a council tax or business rate payer or as a user of a specific service such as libraries, parking, waste and recycling, and schools.

In most instances these interactions are simple and routine and the resident wants to transact with the council quickly and in a manner convenient to them. Many customers consider themselves very “light” users of council services, and can be unaware of the range of services they benefit from each day.

In other instances these interactions are by their nature, more complex and may be targeted at certain groups of residents such as those in supported accommodation, unemployed residents or young offenders.

In a small number of instances, intensive support may be required to get the individual “back on their feet”. These services are more likely to be intensive, complex and targeted to the specific needs of the individual or family.

### **Customer access channels**

Customers currently access council services through a range of different channels including:

- Face to face
- Email
- Internet
- Telephone
- Mobile technology (including SMS text messaging, apps and mobile web)
- Automated telephone technology
- Post

These channels have varying levels of effectiveness depending on the nature of the service being delivered and differ in terms of their cost effectiveness. The choice of access channels available to the public is growing as new technologies are developed. In recent years we have seen the emergence of new channels such as digital social media (such as Facebook and Twitter), mobile internet, and more recently mobile phone applications. However, in some cases a level of reassurance that can only be given in person or over the phone is required, meaning that online service delivery would not be appropriate.

Customers will contact the council for a wide range of reasons, but these contacts can be broadly grouped in to the following three categories:

- **Transactions** (e.g. reporting street litter, requesting a repair or paying a bill)
- **Interactions** (e.g. obtaining advice, public consultations, getting involved)
- **Information Provision** (e.g. cycle maps, leaflets, web pages)

An effective customer access strategy will need to consider the most appropriate channels for each of these types of contact, bearing in mind customer expectations,

the emergence of new, more cost effective channels and the need to make savings across our services.

### Current provision

At present, customer contact with the council is made through a number of means. Although the primary point of contact is the Customer Service Centre (for telephone calls) and the three One Stop Shops (for face to face contact), research has shown that the council also receives a large number of direct contacts to individual officers or teams.

The table below shows the number of contacts received through the Customer Service Centre and the One Stop Shops between 2009 and 2011 and the cost of receiving these contacts. It is important to note that these figures reflect customer access through the customer services delivered through the Vangent contract which only represents a proportion of all customer contacts with the council.

The table shows that there is a decline in the numbers of customers accessing the traditional telephone and One Stop Shop services and an increase in the numbers accessing services online. Weblabs forms went live in June 2011, but have already shown significant take up in a very short time. This reflects both the appetite of customers for accessing services via the web and also the work that services have undertaken to improve their service offering on the council's website.

	Telephony (CSC only)	Weblabs forms ***	Emails/webform (CSC only)	F2F (OSS only)	Total Contacts	Decrease YOY
<b>2009</b>	1,680,804	0	Not available	193,469	1,874,273	NA
<b>2010</b>	1,630,596	0	Not available	197,852	1,828,448	45,825
<b>2011</b>	1,472,794	20,613	71,068 *	181,718	1,746,193	82,255
	Cost per Contact Telephony (CSC only) ****	Cost per contact Web**	Cost per contact Emails (CC only)	Cost per contact (CAP only)		
<b>2009</b>	£2.93	£0.08	£2.93	£11.73		
<b>2010</b>	£2.77	£0.08	£2.77	£11.81		
<b>2011</b>	£2.57	£0.08	£2.57	£11.82		
<b>Total Costs (paid to Vangent)</b>	£36,790,395	NK	inc in tot	Inc in tot		

\* Feb 2011 – Feb 2012

\*\* Not available – estimate

\*\*\* Stats only run from May 2011 to March 2013 – they relate to different services but are primarily concerned with Revenues and Benefits.

\*\*\*\* Simple enquiry rate

## Channel Shift

In December 2011, CMT established a Service Migration Board chaired by the Head of Customer Experience. The Board has had a number of successes to date, including the creation of many on-line transactional forms, improvements to the search facility on the website and recognition of improvements made by SOCITM; the industry standard accrediting body which awarded Southwark 3 stars (up from 2 stars) for its website functionality

While some services have made good progress in seeking to transfer demand to the web, other have yet to do so.

Channel shift is vital if we are to be responsive to the increasing numbers of people with access to the internet via their home PC, at work, at libraries or via a smart phone. The table below demonstrates large increases in visits to the council's website in recent years. Between 2009 and 2011, the number of visits to the website increased by 61%. Many of these customers will have been accessing service information, viewing the jobs pages etc. The challenge for the council is to get these same customers to transact with the council via the website instead of picking up the phone or visiting a one stop shop.

Description	2009	2010	2011
Visits	2,161,740	2,570,648	3,483,326
Pageviews	6,887,788	10,627,455	13,021,759
Pages/Visit	3.19	4.13	3.74
New Visits	51.24%	49.18%	51.75%

### 3 – Vision

In July 2011, the Council agreed a new Council Plan, which is our promise of what we will deliver as a Council. This document outlined a new relationship between the council and our residents, built on trust, openness and transparency in all we do. The plan set out the following six key principles that underpin everything we do:

1. Creating a fairer borough
2. Being more transparent
3. Spending money as we would our own
4. Treating every resident as though they were a member of our own family
5. Realising potential
6. Transforming public services

From this plan, we have developed the following vision for customer services, which has led the development of this strategy:

***“Treating residents as we would want members of our own families to be treated”***

This means we will tell you the truth. We think this is treating you as we would want member of our own families to be treated: We will tell you the truth and will expect you to do the same to us; like any family, sometimes we will disagree but throughout we will maintain a mutually respectful relationship; sometimes we will need to do things together, and sometimes you will want to be left to get on with things yourself.

In Southwark, good customer service means more than how quickly a call is answered, or how soon we acknowledge an email. These things are important, but what makes us really passionate is the quality of services. We are working to design services that put customers in control and foster independence. We aim to simplify and reduce the cost of the most straight forward transactions in order to focus resources on the most complex cases.

From street cleaning to blue badge requests there are certain core standards you can expect from us: we will seek to resolve the issue the first time we’re involved; where-ever possible we will offer services on digital channels; we will help you to use self-service facilities to keep down costs and keep services focussed on delivery; we will treat you with courtesy and respect. Alongside this, by sorting out the most common problems we will put in place measures that minimise your need to get in contact at all.

We will work collaboratively with individuals, families and communities to improve outcomes.

Overall, we will make sure that our people have the right support, resources and leadership to deliver this vision.



## 4 – Strategic Principles

This strategy sets out the following strategic principles that will drive the delivery of improvements to our customer services:

- 1. Taking responsibility for customer service** because an efficient, effective local authority relies on customer focus being embedded at all levels of the organisation
- 2. Getting it right first time** because customers rightly expect that basic enquiries can be resolved correctly at the first point of contact
- 3. Digital by default** because the spread of the internet and mobile technology has presented new opportunities for delivering services more effectively and at lower cost
- 4. Treating everyone with respect** because we have committed to treating our residents as we would want members of our own family to be treated.

### 4.1 Taking responsibility for customer service

**Taking responsibility for customer service** because an efficient, effective local authority relies on customer focus being embedded at all levels of the organisation

The transition to council control of the customer services currently provided by Vangent in June 2013 confirms the council's commitment to delivering excellent customer services. This will be the responsibility of all council staff, not just those who work in the call centre or the one stop shops.

Staff at all levels will be empowered to use their initiative and take ownership of customer enquiries. The focus will be on getting the right outcome for the customer, rather than issues being passed between front and back office without resolution.

We will welcome customer feedback and use this to improve the delivery of services and there will be a greater focus on training and development to improve skills and standards across both the front and back office.

The leadership of the council will take responsibility for communicating our new vision for customer services and ensuring that staff at all levels are fully engaged in the cultural and behavioural change necessary to implement this decision. This strategy has been approved by the council's Corporate Management Team ensuring full senior level support for the approach set out in this document.

### 4.2 Getting it right first time

**Getting it right first time** because customers rightly expect that basic enquiries can be resolved correctly at the first point of contact

In order to meet the financial reductions facing the council, a focus on getting things right first time will be vital. By eliminating wasteful processes and duplication in the way we deliver services, significant savings can be secured, some of which can be reinvested in delivering the more complex services to vulnerable residents which are likely to continue to require multiple contacts. This will mean ensuring the right capacity exists across the organisation to deliver this and that hand offs from the front to the back office are properly managed, particularly in relation to more vulnerable service users.

In order to achieve this, all information will be clear, correct and as detailed as necessary across all channels, helping to reduce avoidable contact. This will include redesigning many of our services so that we don't force our customers into unnecessary contact with us, by automating systems, removing unnecessary steps in our processes and better anticipating customer need.

We will ensure that customers never have to repeat themselves or raise an issue more than once. Where issues can not be resolved at the first point of contact, we will tell customers what will be done and by when and keep them updated on progress as the issue is dealt with.

For some services, there remains a need to build long-term relationships with service users and provide ongoing support to them and their families. In this context, getting it right first time means being clear from the outset about the role the council can play in providing this support and recognising that not all issues can be resolved immediately.

### 4.3 Digital by default

**Digital by default** because the spread of the internet and mobile technology has presented new opportunities for delivering services more effectively and at lower cost

The Government has committed to a 'digital by default' strategy across all public services following the UK Digital Champion Martha Lane-Fox's report which argued for the simplification and strengthening of digital government to improve the quality, and consequently use, of online channels.<sup>1</sup> Southwark Council is committed to delivering services in ways which keep pace with modern technology and recognises the need to move to a 'digital by default' position across all our services.

Delivering services online will therefore be the default option for the delivery of council services, with the My Southwark portal becoming the primary means for contacting the council. Online access points will be signposted and promoted above all others, with a strong online presence for all services, including those where there is no transactional element. This will drive the channel shift from face to face and telephone contact to online delivery which is necessary to deliver services that meet the expectations of our customers and deliver the savings that will be achieved by promoting cheaper, more efficient channels. This includes ensuring that all online services can be accessed through a smart phone or other handheld device as well as through a PC.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Martha%20Lane%20Fox's%20letter%20to%20Francis%20Maude%2014th%20Oct%202010.pdf>

Digital by default means being creative in redesigning our services so that every service that can be transacted online will be to the fullest extent possible. This will include redesigning any process which currently requires our customers to contact us by post so that this is no longer necessary.

In order to support the delivery of services online, we will ensure that wherever possible, staff will use the same online process when dealing with customers on the phone or face to face. This will also present opportunities for introducing live chat or remote access technology in the future.

We recognise that not all residents will be ready for the switch to greater online service delivery and so we will continue to offer other channels where necessary for the customer or the transaction. For a number of our services, face to face interaction is a fundamental part of the service and this will continue to be at the heart of many of our services. However, we will be creative in identifying all the opportunities available for making services accessible online. To support our residents to access services online we will continue to promote digital inclusion by providing free public access to the internet at the borough's libraries with staff on hand to support residents in getting online where this is required. Our digital inclusion approach has three key advantages for our communities which together form a strong basis to support a wide range of other initiatives especially in promoting economic growth, tackling social disadvantage, and in achieving a low carbon society.

#### **4.4 Treating everyone with courtesy and respect**

**Treating everyone with courtesy and respect** because we have committed to treating our residents as we would want members of our own family to be treated

Southwark Council has a diverse set of relationships with local residents that go well beyond the simple transactional customer services that predominate in the private sector. We recognise that some of our customers contact us in difficult and highly emotional circumstances, that sometimes it is the council's job to arbitrate between competing community interests and that often we are required to undertake enforcement activity against individuals, families or businesses for the common good. However, across these different types of contact and relationship with the citizen, we have a duty to treat everyone with courtesy and respect.

The Council Plan is clear that as a council we will treat every resident as we would want members of our own family to be treated. This means taking the time to understand every query or issue from the customer's perspective and speaking to customers in terms that can be readily understood.

The customer service standards at Appendix 1 of this strategy set out our commitment to our customers and how we will meet their expectations when they contact the council. Integral to this approach will be our willingness to be honest when we get things wrong and to work to put things right as soon as possible. We will also thank residents who help us and tell them what action we have taken, for example when an abandoned car is reported.

## 5 – Delivering the new approach

In order to deliver our new vision for customer access in Southwark, we will need to ensure that our delivery models are fit for purpose. In practice this will mean:

- A single in-house contact centre and switchboard at Queens Road
- Fully rationalised customer access points
- An up to date, modern website through which most services can be transacted
- Self-service promoted and encouraged

The transition to this model will be carefully managed and will be programmed so that not all services will be delivered in this way from 1 June 2013. Before services are transitioned, full assessments will be carried out in partnership with service leads to ensure that necessary capacity and quality levels are in place.

More details about each of these elements of our delivery model are set out below:

### **Single in-house switchboard and contact centre**

From 1 June 2013, our customer services will be delivered through a single in-house switchboard and contact centre located at the Queens Road campus in Peckham. This contact centre will become the primary point of telephone access for customers for all services (including those not currently within the Vangent contract).

The key elements of this approach will be:

- For routine enquiries, there will be automated routing and signposting technology.
- Contact centre staff will be trained to work with prompts, not scripts, and will fully engage with the residents who contact us by phone, providing a friendly, professional service
- The Customer Experience division will be responsible for setting and monitoring customer service standards working closely with service leads
- Wherever practical, services will be configured and staff up-skilled to allow resolution at the first point of contact
- Some specialist staff may also be located within the contact centre on a temporary or permanent basis to maximise opportunities for resolution at first point of contact
- Where hand-offs to specialist staff in the back office are necessary, the relevant team will collaborate with the Customer Experience team to ensure high quality end to end service
- Back office staff will have access to the same view of the customer as contact centre staff

### **Customer access points fully rationalised**

We are committed to retaining our own branded customer access points for the foreseeable future, but will work to rationalise the delivery of face to face contact. In many cases this will see face to face provision phased out where the type of transaction and the existence of provision across other channels renders it unnecessary

The key elements of this approach will be:

- Face to face transactions will be delivered through booked appointments in preference to a “drop in and queue” service, as this allows us to offer a better service to customers
- Written communications will be clear and signpost to the website for any follow up actions, so we are not generating face to face visits from confused or anxious residents
- Appointments with specialist staff may also be arranged at the Queens Road campus and other specified locations where customers can be served effectively (e.g. Canada Water Library)
- Cash payments will continue to be accepted from residents but there will be no cash handling by the council – a timetable for closing the cash offices and procuring alternative provision (e.g. through the Post Office) will be agreed.

### **An up to date, modern website through which most services can be transacted**

Ensuring that the council's website is fit for purpose will be vital if we are to deliver the vision set out in this strategy. Significant work has already been undertaken to migrate services online and ensure the website is able to conduct transactional services smoothly and efficiently from both the customer and back office perspective.

The key elements of this approach will be:

- The My Southwark portal will be promoted as the primary means of accessing council services
- The Customer Experience division will ‘own’ the website, with Information Systems responsible for technical support and Communications responsible for branding, design and social media
- Keeping website content complete and up to date will be a priority for all council departments and will be resourced accordingly

### **Self-service promoted, supported and incentivised**

The new service will have a strong focus on self-service wherever this is appropriate. This will increase customers' ability to access services at the time of their choosing and will enable significant savings to be made in the delivery of our customer services. To support this change, incentives will be provided to encourage self-service by customers.

The key elements of this approach will be:

- Self-service terminals will be provided at all customer access points and customers will be encouraged and assisted to make use of them
- Customers will be incentivised to self-serve (financially or otherwise)
- Support and assistance will always be available for those that need it
- E-forms will be prominent on the website and integrated with back office systems, enabling end to end self-service wherever possible
- Generic e-mail accounts will be deleted and e-mail addresses will not be published, only the website address

## Appendix A – Customer Service Standards

### **Southwark: Customer Service Standards**

- ***Treating everyone as we would wish a member of our family to be treated***

When it comes to customer service, we know you want us to deliver the services you need, meeting the promises we make for quality and time. You also expect us to keep you well informed and to treat you with respect.

To ensure our customer service is as good as that you will find anywhere, these are our commitments to you:

#### **We will be easy to contact and do business with**

- The staff you deal with will be knowledgeable, polite and respectful
- Staff will give you their name and take responsibility for helping you or will find someone who can
- Our aim is to say “yes”, but we will be clear and straightforward where we can’t help, and where possible, we will point you in the direction of somewhere that can

#### **We will deal with you as efficiently and quickly as we can**

- We will do our best to resolve your enquiry and get it right, first time
- We will continually improve, ensuring that our services represent good value for money for residents, keeping resources focussed on service delivery
- We will keep up with the development of new technology so that you can access our services in the modern ways you want

#### **We will treat you fairly, with courtesy and respect**

- We will communicate with you in a clear and honest way and give you the right information for you to make choices
- Where you have a problem, we will listen to you and properly understand the issue.
- We will value your feedback and will use your comments and complaints to improve our services for the future