

Customer Strategy 2007-2010

Putting Our Customers First

CUSTOMER STRATEGY 2007/10

PUTTING OUR CUSTOMERS FIRST

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1. Introduction

Richmond upon Thames Council aims to provide the best possible services for our customers by putting the customer first. Our Customer First programme was launched in 2003.

The Customer Strategy sets out how the Council will respond to our customers' needs, how we will ensure that services are accessible, and how we will involve customers in planning and delivering our services. We know that we will not be able to meet the needs of all of our customers all of the time, but we aim to use our resources in the best way possible and to make open and transparent decisions.

Our customers are those who benefit from the services we provide, the people for whom we work to deliver, commission, contract and enable services. They may be people who live or work in the borough, those who visit the area, or businesses located here.

We aim to provide information and services for customers based on the following **principles**:

- Our customers are customers of the Council not the service
- Our customers' needs come first
- Our customers are always in the right place.

The **objectives** of the Strategy are to ensure:

1. Services are more accessible.
2. Services are designed, reviewed and developed with customers.
3. Services are inclusive and responsive to customers' choices and needs.
4. Services work with partners to provide joined up delivery.
5. Technologies adopted are efficient and effective.
6. Staff are supported and empowered to deliver excellent customer service.

The Council's overall priorities are:

- Environment and Sustainability
- Education and Children's Services
- Community Safety
- Promoting the Health, Housing and Well Being of All Residents
- Efficient Local Government.

There are also a number of other policies and strategies that have a bearing on this Strategy and our overall approach.

- The Community Plan and the development of a new Plan by the Local Strategic Partnership to cover the period 2007-2017, resulting from a major consultation exercise in the autumn of 2006.
- Equalities Strategy and Policy, and how we ensure that equalities and diversity are integrated in all aspects of customer service.
- The Council's ICT and E-Government Strategy, which sets out the way that technology will support the Council's strategic objectives over coming years.
- The Communications Strategy, and the ways in which we ensure that the community knows what we are planning to do, how they are involved, and how we will report our performance.

- The Workforce Development Plan which aims to ensure that we recruit, retain and develop the right staff to meet our objectives, including the delivery of excellent customer service.

The Council is also mindful of the Strong and Prosperous Communities Local Government White Paper published in October 2006, which emphasises the importance of customers driving service improvement, and being able to feed into the new performance management and inspection framework for local government.

2. Our Services – Where We Are Now

Customers chose to contact us in a number of different ways. The current estimates (excluding letters) based on 2005/06 figures are:

- Telephone - approximately 1,000,800 incoming calls
- Face to Face – not measured across all services
- Email – 6,000,000 incoming emails
- Website – 1,400,000 individual visits viewing 20,000,000 pages.

The average number of assisted contacts per day is:

Phone	Contacts
Switchboard	1100
Customer Service Centre (CSC)	620
Council Tax	400
Sub Total	2120
Face To Face	220
Total	2340

Telephone

Calls are received via the Council's switchboard, to Council officers on direct dial numbers, Council Tax call centre, and to the Customer Service Centre (CSC), which was launched in July 2005. This handles calls relating to waste, recycling, street scene, planning, trees and parks. Transport planning and highways services were included in December 2006.

The Council is using Customer Relationship Management (CRM) technology to deliver the CSC. This enables us to hold information about customers and as the services covered by the CSC expand we will be able to provide a more joined up and personalised service. CRM records a customer enquiry from when it is first made until the completion of any action needed to resolve a complaint or defect reported. This enables the performance of services to be monitored. The CSC has Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with services and works with them to improve performance. The CSC staff act as customer champions ensuring that the enquiry is resolved to the customer's satisfaction.

Current performance of the CSC shows that 80% of inquiries are resolved at the first point of contact. About 600 calls are received each day. 81% are answered within 20 seconds with only 4% of calls abandoned. The Centre also deals with emails to the generic mailboxes of the services covered, and approximately 80 of these are received each day. 90% of inquiries are satisfactorily resolved.

In support of the CSC the business processes, which deliver the services, are being redesigned to ensure that services are delivered in the most efficient and effective way.

Careline, the Council's out of hours service, also takes calls, and passes on any non-urgent out of hours messages to relevant departments.

Face to Face

The Council currently provides two general reception facilities:

- Atrium, Civic Centre, Twickenham
- Sheen Lane Centre, East Sheen

In a sample in 2006 the usage of the Civic Centre reception was fairly evenly split between the services located there – 26% for Finance and Corporate Services, 24% for Environment, 24% for Adult Social Services and Housing, the remainder being mostly signposting, sales and deliveries.

At Sheen Lane, Environment enquiries were the highest at 44%, Finance and Corporate Services at 32%, Adult Social Services and Housing at 6%, and the rest mostly for partner agencies.

There are also three service reception facilities:

- Education and Children's Services, Regal House
- Environment, 2nd Floor Civic Centre
- Adult Social Services, and Children's Specialist Services, 42 York Street.

In addition there are other office locations that receive visitors by appointment such as Elmfield House, Teddington and Centre House, East Sheen (Adult Social Services).

The Council has 13 libraries (central lending and reference libraries, three district libraries and 8 branch libraries) where members of the public may obtain information including advice and signposting by library staff.

There is limited information about library usage outside their core business, although they deal with a range of inquiries about Council and other providers' services.

Website

The Council's website was relaunched in June 2005 to provide customers with information, and to enable them to carry out a range of transactions. Customers are increasingly using the website for information, to make planning applications online and submit comments, apply for jobs with the Council, report defects, make bookings, renew library books, check times of rubbish collections, and to pay bills. Of all credit/debit card payments to the Council in June 2006, online payments via the website comprised 47.76% of volume and 46.07% of value. The website provides the customer with flexibility over the time of access to services.

Email

Most customer facing services have departmental email addresses, and customers increasingly use these as well as emails direct to named council officers. This is a very popular way of contacting the Council, and the CSC has the ability to respond to SMS / text messages

Post

Customers continue to contact us by letter, although this is reducing. We need to ensure that customers who use this method of communication receive the same level of service as those who use electronic means.

Other Channels

We have two public kiosks in Richmond and Teddington which provide website and email access. Their usage figures are as follows:

Kiosk	Average number of "general" uses per month	Average number of uses for Council information per month
Teddington	1,463	55
Richmond	648	28
Total	2,111	83

Customer Services Section

Good customer service is the responsibility of all of our staff, but we have a corporate Customer Services Section currently within the Environment Directorate. Their responsibility is to staff the Council's corporate receptions and the CSC.

3. Our Standards and Commitments

Customer First Standards

The Council's corporate customer service standards are:

- Telephone calls will be answered within five rings.
- CSC 80% of calls answered within 20 seconds
- Letters will be responded to in seven working days, or if a full response cannot be sent in this time, an acknowledgement will be sent in two working days advising when a full response may be expected.
- All external emails will be acknowledged within one working day of receipt, and a full response sent within the letter response standard.
- Complaints will be responded to within 15 working days at stage 1 (by the manager of the service), 20 working days at stage 2 (by the head of service), and 25 working days at stage 3 (by the Chief Executive).
- Our reception areas will be clearly signposted
- We aim to assess customers' requirements within 5 minutes
- All our staff are easily identified by uniform and name badges
- If the query is confidential, a private area will be offered
- We will greet customers in a friendly and professional manner

- We will treat customers as individuals, and give a quality service to meet their needs
- We will answer queries immediately, or arrange when to call back
- If English is not a customer's first language, we will use an interpreter to help.

The following minimum corporate standards have been agreed for all of the Council's receptions:

- Performance Standards for Customer Reception Staff
- Management Photo boards
- Service Standards and Performance Information Boards
- Service Charters/Service Advice Leaflets
- Questionnaire/Suggestion/Comment /Complaint forms and boxes
- Customer Feedback and Q&A Boards
- Child Friendly Areas/ Play equipment
- Queuing Systems/Waiting Time Monitoring (where appropriate)
- Adequate external and Internal Signage
- Multi-agency Advice Surgeries.

Complaints Procedure

The Council's complaints procedure enables clear and accessible reporting including via the website. Complaints are monitored quarterly by Executive Board, and an annual report is produced and reported to an Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Customers may also send comments or compliments via the website.

Charter Mark

Charter Mark is the national standard for customer service for organisations delivering public services, and is independently evaluated and assessed. There are six criteria against which a service is assessed:

- Set standards and perform well
- Actively engage with customers, partners and staff
- Be fair and accessible to everyone, and promote choice
- Continuously develop and improve
- Use resources effectively and imaginatively
- Contribute to improving opportunities and quality of life in the community.

The Council has agreed that all customer facing services should aim to achieve Charter Mark, and those who have not already done so are now working towards accreditation.

The following services have now achieved Charter Mark:

- Consumer Protection (including Trading Standards, Commercial Environmental Health, and Licensing)
- Register Officer
- Residential Environmental Health
- Customer Services
- Health Development
- Cemeteries
- Community Safety
- Building Control
- Housing
- Planning

- Waste and Recycling
- Sports and Fitness

Equalities and Diversity

Our approach to customer services needs to ensure the integration of equalities and diversity issues. This includes the design of services to meet the community's needs, and our interaction with customers, whether face to face, by the telephone or website. This is an important part of our staff training and development.

In terms of contact this will be reflected in terms of accessibility – physical access to buildings, language, translation and interpretation, and tailored services. Customer service has an important part to play in the Council's progress against the Equality Standard for Local Government and the Council's Equality Scheme. The Council has a programme of Equality Needs Impact Assessments, which examine how the needs of different members of the community are met.

Our Staff

Our commitment to excellent customer service will be achieved only if we ensure that our staff are equipped with the right skills, and are supported to meet our customers' needs. This is an important part of Investors in People and the Council was accredited as a whole in January 2006.

We launched a Customer First Training Programme in 2004, and approximately 500 frontline staff have attended the course. We have also held customer training for senior managers, and integrated in other development programmes such as Capacity Building for middle managers. Having evaluated our frontline programme, we have now commissioned a programme for new starters, and facilitated workshops for teams of staff wanting to review and improve customer service. We have also encouraged those staff who work in the Customer Services section to study for the NVQ in customer service.

In 2003 we launched an annual campaign called Customer Champions for members of the public to nominate staff who have delivered excellent customer service. This has proved popular with the public and staff, and those nominated are recognised at an annual awards event.

We have developed a Frontline Staff Focus Group who develop ideas about improving customer service. Several of their recommendations have been implemented.

As part of our regular Employee Survey we ask staff about how customer focussed they think the organisation is. The rating in the 2005 survey was that 80% of staff thought that the Council is committed to customer satisfaction. This was a 19% increase on the previous survey in 2003.

4. Performance and Feedback

Consultation and Participation

The Council has undertaken extensive consultation over many years. This includes surveys and questionnaires about general attitudes and specific proposals, feedback forms, focus groups and use of our 1,200 member Citizens' Panel. We will use the outcomes of the community planning consultation in 2006 to help to determine the strategic direction of the Council. Major consultation has also been required to produce

the Local Development Framework. We are developing our approach to involving customers in reviewing and designing services.

Mystery Shopping

The Council has a programme of mystery shopping in place carried out by an independent market research company. The outcomes are used to improve service delivery and recognise and share good practice.

Monitoring Performance

The performance management framework includes the production of annual Service Plans by all services, and these will include customer targets. These plans are monitored quarterly, and reported to Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

Governance

The Council has ensured that there is strong leadership on our customer approach. The Cabinet Member for Communities has the lead for customer focus, and works closely with officers to develop policy and monitor performance.

The Customer First Group of officers, representing all Council services, meets regularly to review progress on initiatives, to consider best practice from other organisations, and develop new areas of work.

5. Working with partners

The Council works with its partners on the Local Strategic Partnership to deliver the Community Plan, and undertake specific initiatives. We actively seek to deliver services jointly with our partners, and have been successful in a number of areas, particularly working with health, police, the voluntary sector, colleges and transport providers.

Several of the Safer Neighbourhood Team (SNT) call types are similar to the enquiries handled by the CSC. Therefore the police and CSC are working together to progress a call handling partnership to enable the CSC to be the first point of contact for SNT calls.

Customer enquiries about the waste management services generate a significant amount of calls. Therefore the CSC works closely with the Waste Management contractor Veolia. There is close communication, and regular meetings, in order to ensure that the customer is provided with proactive communication.

Social Care and Health provision are increasingly being commissioned and provided jointly by Adult Social Services and the Primary Care Trust. These close working relationships provide benefits in terms of service efficiencies, integrated service design, and combined visits to the customer. There are also close working relationships in the provision of training for local people wanting to get involved in decision-making bodies, such as the Joint Commissioning Boards.

The formation of the Education and Children's Directorate in May 2006 has brought together a range of services for children and young people including education, social care and health, and involves partners from across the public and voluntary sectors to provide joined up services.

6. Making Our Services More Accessible – Where We Want To Be

In the last residents' attitudes survey, carried out as part of the Best Value Performance Indicators in 2003, the overall satisfaction with the Council was 55% (10th in London). We hope to improve on this figure when the 2006 triennial survey results are published.

The Council has made significant progress on customer service over the last few years. We are now in position to build on those foundations. This requires a review of our resources, and in some cases a re-directing of these to reflect customer needs.

Telephone

Our aim is to create a corporate contact centre which will give residents a single phone number for enquiries, with highly trained staff, using the latest Customer Relationship Management (CRM) technology. This will provide a more coherent service to customers as information about their service use will be held in a coordinated record.

We have already progressed development of a single call to report a change of address, so that the customer does not have to contact a number of different departments with separate calls.

The CSC has successfully improved service delivery across a range of environmental services since its launch in July 2005. Work is ongoing to incorporate the remainder of high volume services within Environment into the centre, and depending on the level of integration, this should be completed by Spring 2007. Some Adult Social Services calls were transferred to the CSC in December 2006.

In order to expand the CSC into other services, there is a need to invest in some telephony upgrades that will allow for some limited menus to be introduced, better targeting of calls to those staff most able to help, better resource planning within the centre, and a move towards one single advertised number for all calls to the Council (other than where there are joint services with partners). The Cabinet will consider the procurement of this technology in early 2007.

Following on from this investment there is a need to agree the phasing of other services to migrate into the corporate centre, and it is recommended that services are considered in the following order:

1. Revenues and Benefits – a recent study of this area concluded that without the telephony upgrades referred to above, integration into the CSC was impracticable. This position will be reviewed in spring 2007, and a final decision taken on what elements of the service will transfer, though it should be noted that this will not include any system integration. Full integration with the back office system will follow at a later date.
2. Libraries public phone calls – by autumn 2007.
3. HR recruitment phone calls - by end of 2007.
4. Others – during 2007/08. The inclusion of all of the above services will have covered all areas of high volume, but it is felt that there would still be merit in then considering all other front line services.

To make the transition as efficient and effective as possible we need to:

1. Resource the CSC adequately to create a strong and effective organisational structure. This is critical in delivering a professional and

- efficient service which meets the needs of our customers. Funding for this will be considered as part of the forthcoming corporate reorganisation.
2. Re-engineer services before or immediately after migration to the CSC. This work is resource intensive, and there is a need to refine our current practices to focus on the obvious quick wins.
 3. Tackle issues of back office system integration with the CRM, which is expensive.
 4. Make the CSC truly multi channel dealing with phone calls, emails, texts, and potentially scanned "letters". In addition, by integrating the web channel so that the CSC can see what contacts the customer has made via the website, a complete picture of customer contacts is obtained, thus creating a true front office dealing with all non face to face customer contact, and a back office function that deals exclusively with professional/processing work.
 5. Market the service as more services are incorporated in the CSC, and we are able to introduce one telephone number. We will need a campaign to promote this. It is thought that this point may arise sometime in the first half of 2007/08 when Environment services and Revenues and Benefits are completed.
 6. Assess the future role of Careline and the level of service we provide on a 24/7 basis. Although demand for out of hours services appears to be low, since the Careline service already takes such calls, and passes them on to the relevant service, this could be formalised by bringing the management structures of the CSC and the calls to Careline together.

Face to Face

The use of Sheen Lane has been disappointing since its opening, particularly the extended opening on Saturday mornings and Wednesday evenings. We now need to review the future of this facility.

The Atrium is our main location for personal visits. Mystery shopping results showed that the space is a confusing one for new visitors, and that signing and demarcation of the different functions is poor. We will therefore develop proposals for the re-design and refurbishment of this area.

We have looked at the role of Libraries but there is no obvious demand for them to be developed beyond their current role in terms of information provision and signposting. There may be some demand in the higher need areas of the borough (Ham, Mortlake, Castelnau, Edgar Road), but these areas were visited weekly by the former mobile office, and take up of services was very low when the service ended in 2003. We would not therefore propose any such services at this stage, but keep this under review, particularly when opportunities arise, such as through the joint work with the Primary Care Trust and Richmond Housing Partnership. It is also worth noting that face to face transactions are becoming increasingly sophisticated when staff have mobile devices etc., and that one way of satisfying local demand for high dependency clients who may be unable/unwilling to travel to an office would be use of visiting staff with tablets (hand-held devices) – completion of various applications electronically in the home. Children's Centres and extended schools may also provide a further opportunity.

A significant number of customers use the two Parking Shops in Twickenham and Sheen mainly to renew parking permits. A review of the process of issuing permits has recommended that it be streamlined to avoid the need to visit at least annually in person. Fewer parking charges are also being paid in person. The need for these facilities to continue will be reviewed, and one of the Shops may be closed in 2007.

Website

Many services already have good information coverage on the public website, and an increasing number allow for customers to carry out transactions and make bookings. A high proportion of residents have access to, and regularly use, the Internet. A recent survey also suggested that residents in Barnes were the highest users of Internet shopping, and other parts of the borough were not far behind. This would support the increasing development of the website to enable people to complete transactions online. Internet transactions are significantly cheaper than face to face or by telephone.

The following areas will be prioritised over the next 12 months:

1. Continuously revising and improving the site in light of feedback to improve accessibility and usability for customers. Priorities have already been identified for Adult Social Services and Environment.
2. Developing additional online forms and other enhancements to support the CSC, and as part of the integration and re-engineering of services.
3. Responding to mystery shopping exercises. Recent results highlighted the limitations of some front line staff's knowledge of what information is available on the public site, and suggested many lacked the confidence to direct customers to it. Specific training in the form of short, targeted sessions will be rolled out across all front line staff by April 2007 to address this.
4. Continuing to develop the facility allowing on line payment for ad hoc non-billed services.
5. Implementation of a sports and leisure booking facility by April 2007 to make reservations and payments online.
6. We aim to develop a citizen's account, by which residents will be able to access a range of personalised Council held information, and request more easily certain services without always having to re-authenticate themselves.
7. The drive to join up sites, principally in our case Government Direct, Your London, and key partner sites such as the police and health, continues. It is expected that this will remain a key priority over the next year.
8. E democracy – it is recommended that the on line presence of Members and associated issues such as e petitions is formally revisited and a way forward agreed in early 2007.

Post

We will consider how we let customers know that there are more efficient and effective ways of contacting us than by letter. However we also need to ensure that we monitor responses to correspondence both manually and electronically, and we should aim for scanning so that we can create an electronic record, which is more readily monitored.

Other channels

There is an argument that as personal mobile phones become very widely used, and increasingly powerful, the rationale for our fixed kiosks diminishes. However the usage figures remain fairly constant, though the numbers using them specifically to access Council information, as opposed to other more generic web content and email services, are low. This could well be that the Council information on them predates the migration of the main public web site last year. This new platform allows for much easier creation and maintenance of content, and it is recommended that the overall kiosk position is

reviewed again in a year's time after operating for a number of months with revised Council content.

The Government has promoted the use of digital television as a way of customers accessing information in services, but we do not consider this to be necessary in an area such as Richmond where there is high Internet access through home, work, library or café PCs.

Our Staff

We want to develop a culture that values a deeper understanding of the customer across the whole organisation. We will continue to develop ways in which we support our staff to deliver excellent customer service, including through our Customer First and Equalities and Diversity training programmes. We will also actively engage with our staff to seek their views about how we improve our services, including through the Innovations campaign.

Working with Our Customers

We will progress our work to ensure that departments involve customers in the design, review and development of services, so that they meet customers' needs. To help services do this, and to assess their overall customer focus, we have developed a methodology to assess where a service is, and areas for further work. We have piloted this in 2006, and will roll out to other services.

We will be using a relatively new approach for local government called 'customer segmentation' to help us to understand where customers with different needs live, and the services they may wish to access. This will help us to determine how best to use our resources in the future.

We will ensure that as part of our overall approach to community engagement and consultation we regularly ask customers for their feedback on services, and that we use this and information gained from complaints to review and improve delivery.

We aim to develop a single customer view. This brings all key customer data together in one place so that we can understand our relationship with the customer as a whole, not just on a service level.

Working with Partners

We will continue to look for opportunities to work with partner organisations to improve and join up service delivery to our customers.

7. Customer Strategy Action Plan – How We Get There

Objective	Action	By when
1. Services are more accessible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Expand services included in the Customer Service Centre (CSC) to become corporate resource. b. Assess the future role of Careline in relation to the CSC. c. Launch of one number for the CSC and marketing to customers. d. Market the most efficient ways for customers to access services. e. Develop transactional capacity of website including citizen's accounts. f. Review face to face contact including enhancement of facilities at the Civic Centre and the future of Sheen Lane Centre. 	<p>March 2008</p> <p>March 2007</p> <p>Summer 2007</p> <p>April 2007</p> <p>March 2007</p> <p>March 2007</p>
2. Services are designed, reviewed and developed with customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. All external services to achieve Charter Mark b. The Customer/User Methodology which builds on Charter Mark to be rolled out to two more services following the pilot in Revenues and Benefits c. Use customer segmentation data to determine customers' preferences and needs for accessing services, and ensure the channels and services are available in the right place and at the right time. 	<p>March 2008</p> <p>December 2007</p> <p>April 2007</p>

<p>3. Services are inclusive and responsive to customers' choices and needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Ensure that all customer facing services complete Equalities Needs Impact Assessments b. Develop service action plans to respond to the results of mystery shopping c. Ensure that the Customer Strategy action links to the evolving Community Engagement Strategy. 	<p>March 2008</p> <p>Quarterly</p> <p>TBA</p>
<p>4. Services work with partners to provide joined up delivery</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The Local Strategic Partnership to be asked to consider how we may improve operational joint working to improve customer service. 	<p>April 2007</p>
<p>5. Technologies adopted are efficient and effective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Develop route maps for CRM, the website and back office systems which align essential technical changes with the redesign and delivery of improved services for customers 	<p>April 2007</p>
<p>6. Staff are supported and empowered to deliver excellent customer service</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Review and evaluate the Customer First Training Strategy and current provision b. Ensure links between Customer First and Investors in People as the latter is subject to Internal Review Assessments c. Develop the Frontline Focus Group as a resource for feedback and improved ways of working 	<p>September 2007</p> <p>December 2008</p> <p>June 2007</p>