



TITLE: Customer Services Standards & Complaints Procedure

TO/ON: Executive 20 April 2005

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LEAD MEMBER: Janet Farquarson

STATUS: FOR PUBLICATION

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To present the final draft(s) of the Customer Services Strategy, Customer Services Standards and Customer Feedback Form (Comments, Compliments & Complaints) for adoption by all.
- 1.2 To seek approval for the method of reporting and measuring compliance against the new customer services standards and customer feedback.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Executive approves the new strategy, standards and feedback form to be adopted immediately and approves the method of reporting and measuring compliance against the new standards.

3. REPORT AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS AND TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- 3.1 A Customer Services Best Value Review was carried out by HACAS Chapman Hendy consultants from July to December 2004. As a result of the review a number of improvement plans were developed and approved for implementation by Executive in December 2004. The improvement plans included draft customer services strategy and customer service standards as well as a recommendation to review and improve the current complaints procedure.
- 3.2 A draft of the customer services strategy (appendix 1), customer services standards (appendix 2) as well as newly revamped customer feedback / complaints procedure (appendix 3) were completed as a result of input from staff and senior officers after attending several road shows held in February 2005 to outline and explain the new initiatives. The Road Shows were very well attended by over 200 staff from all departments. Questions that were raised at the meetings have been collated with answers and posted on the intranet. In

addition, a separate presentation was delivered to Heads of Service (or their representatives) on 10 March 2005 in an effort to obtain “buy in” at the highest level.

3.3 New Customer Services Standards

The customer service standards and targets around telephony, voice mail, email, post and face to face activity etc have been developed from National Standards of best practise from private, public and voluntary sectors and their adoption within Rossendale by all will ensure a much improved customer satisfaction rating from the 27% reported in 2003/4.

3.4. New Complaint Procedure (On The Record)

Complaints were also a source of customer dissatisfaction in 2003/4 with only 22% satisfied with how their complaint had been handled. The Customer Services Best Value Review highlighted that the complaints procedure was not followed correctly by all staff and that Elected Members and customers had little confidence in it. Given this, some Elected Members had resorted to “by passing” the system all together by approaching officers directly to get their constituents complaint resolved quickly.

However, this approach has meant that not all complaints have been recorded onto the complaint database. Therefore we do not have a complete central picture of where the main areas of dissatisfaction have been. This is a missed opportunity for Rossendale to demonstrate that it is a “learning organisation” and that it routinely uses this type of customer data to direct and prioritise resources in line with customer needs. It is therefore essential that the correct procedure is followed. A briefing note which incorporates the new changes will be issued to all staff and Elected Members following this report.

The new form has also been designed to capture information regarding the diversity and ethnic origin of customers at the start of the process. Finally, feedback from staff and the Community Involvement Working Group suggested that we incorporate comments and compliments within the “on the record” feedback form. This data will also be useful in improving services and utilised correctly will help improve staff morale and public perception of Rossendale Council.

3.5 Monitoring & Reporting

In order to be able to demonstrate real improvements in Customer Service it is important to be able to measure and regularly report performance and compliance against the targets set within the new standards. With this in mind the following method is set out for consideration:

i) It is intended that quarterly internal mystery shopping exercises are carried by the Rossendale Change Team (led by the Head of Customer Services) to assess the level of compliance with the new customer service standards across all service areas. The results of these exercises with appropriate recommendations will be reported to Senior Management Team and to Executive on a quarterly basis.

ii) Similarly, it is proposed that reporting of comments, compliments & complaints will be achieved via a quarterly return completed by all Heads of Service (appendix 4) for their service area. This information will be collated by the Head of Customer Service and form the basis of a quarterly report to Senior Management Team and Executive. It will include a measurement of the number of actions and changes made as a result of the complaints received.

4. CORPORATE IMPROVEMENT PRIORITIES

4.1 FINANCE AND RISK MANAGEMENT

4.1.1 The activity outlined within this report requires no additional financial resources and will be part of business as usual for Customer Services & E Government team.

4.2 MEMBER DEVELOPMENT AND POLITICAL ARRANGEMENTS

4.2.1 Members are critical to the process of ensuring service standards are adhered to by all across all services. They will play a vital part supporting the Head of Customer Services in ensuring that non compliance within service areas is not an option and will actively discouraged.

4.3 HUMAN RESOURCES

4.3.1 The road shows and presentations to Heads of Services emphasised the point that in order to turn around customer and staff perceptions of Rossendale Borough Council it is important that these standards do not just apply to front line staff. These new initiatives are intended to apply to every staff member and representatives of Rossendale Council. Senior Managers have a particularly important role to play in “leading by example” and taking on board the standards themselves as well as challenging staff who do not comply with them.

4.3.2 Once approved by Committee, the final standards and changes will be communicated to all staff in order to facilitate the “bedding in” process so that the standards become the new culture and ethos of Rossendale Council. This process will include, e mail circulars, postings on web and intranet as well as informal group meetings for staff who are not able to receive information via e mail.

4.3.3 Front line staffs are clearly paramount to the success of this initiative and will be the first to be trained in the new standards. Similarly, the standards will be incorporated into inductions for all new staff and into the customer focus training for all existing staff. Information on the new standards will also be posted onto the intranet and internet as appropriate.

4.4 ANY OTHER RELEVANT CORPORATE PRIORITIES

- 4.4.1 All Services will have some form of customer interaction within the role of their departments, particularly when we include interaction with internal customers. Therefore, compliance with the new standards have the potential to impact positively on all Corporate priorities, and has a particular role to play in ensuring consistently high standards of behaviours and attitudes of staff towards all our customers.

5. RISK

- 5.1 Non compliance with the customer service standards and complaints procedure will mean a risk to improving customer satisfaction ratings (BVPI 3 and 4) and the Councils vision and aspiration of 8x8 by 2008.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS ARISING FROM THE REPORT

- 6.1 None as a direct result of this report.

7. EQUALITIES ISSUES ARISING FROM THE REPORT

- 7.1 The new customer service standards and complaints procedure emphasise the importance of applying the same high standards of customer care to all customers irrespective of ethnic origin, race, disability, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion or cultural beliefs.

The new complaints form affords an opportunity for customers to furnish the Council with this information at the start of the complaint/feedback process for the first time. This data will be invaluable on several fronts, but perhaps most importantly, can be used to establish if all customer groups are engaging with the Council (or not) and will assist with prioritising resources for front line services/activities to meet the exact needs of Rossendales unique customer base.

8. WARDS AFFECTED

- 8.1 All

9. CONSULTATIONS

- 9.1 Consultation activity for the development of the above documents included Elected Members, Staff, Senior Managers and Officers, Customers and Customer Representative Groups mostly during the Customer Services Best Value Review that finished in December 2004. Additional feedback from staff road shows & Heads of Service presentations (Feb & Mar 2005) as well as Member training/briefing (Mar 2005) have been collated and incorporated into the final draft documents for Committee approval.

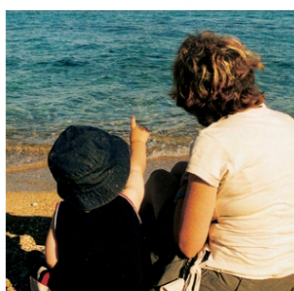
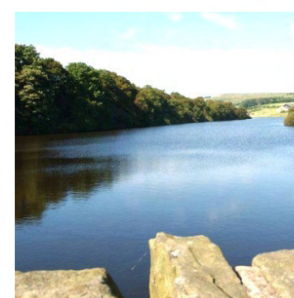
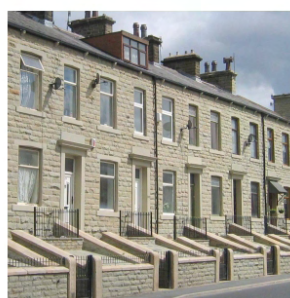
Background documents: None

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Customer Service Strategy

Borough of
Rossendale



ROSSENDALE BOROUGH COUNCIL

'PUTTING CUSTOMERS FIRST'

Rossendale Council Customer Services Strategy Document – A Summary

Why do we need a Strategy?

We need a Strategy in order to drive up the standard of service offered to our customers. Improving customer services is the key to the 8 x 8 by 2008 vision (8 out of 10 customers satisfied with our services and 8 out of 10 performance indicators in the upper quartile nationally) and is one of our Corporate Priorities.

Influences on the Strategy?

There are many influences that have helped to shape this Strategy but key factors include:

- The Best Value Review of Customer Services.
- Stakeholder consultations conducted over the previous 12 months, involving customers and customer representative groups, elected members, staff and partners.
- The Comprehensive Performance Assessment and other internal and external audits such as the Benefits Fraud Inspection and the Housing Inspection.

What are the Aims and Objectives of the Strategy?

- To ensure that Rossendale Council provides an excellent customer service to **all** customers.
- Putting customers first at every point of contact with the Council.
- Increasing the number of customer transactions with the Council that are resolved at the first point of contact.
- Providing services that have been designed for customers and not for the convenience of the service provider.
- To help facilitate a cultural change within the Council which will make us more customer focused.

Who is responsible for ensuring that the Strategy is implemented?

Every member and Council employee can help to create a good impression of the Council and help to deliver a first class customer experience. We are all responsible for ensuring that the Strategy is implemented. Overall project management for the Customer Services Strategy lies with the Change Management Group and the Head of Service for Customer Services.

What will adopting the Strategy do for us?

The Strategy will improve the customer experience by:

- Raising customer satisfaction levels for all Council services.
- Providing a consistent approach to Customer Service across the Council.
- Implementing corporate customer service standards that are consistently applied across all service areas.

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- Aiming to provide a customer service that is amongst the 'best in class' compared with similar local authorities.
 - Setting high standards and stretching improvement targets that are measured and reported regularly in a consistent way.
 - Improving the image of Rossendale Council so that customers associate it with providing high quality, customer focused professional services.

How will it help us understand customer needs and expectations?

The Strategy incorporates improvement plans and standards that will ensure we have:

- Systems that collect comprehensive customer information that will inform our future decisions.
- Ongoing comprehensive consultation with all stakeholders and customers, including hard to reach groups and those with special requirements.

How will we keep our promises to our customers?

We have a duty to be accountable for all our actions, most importantly to our customers. This Strategy will ensure that we have:

- Services that tell customers what to expect, e.g., our targets, standards and performance.
- Services that inform customers of their rights and what to do when things go wrong.
- An ethos of encouraging personal accountability for everything we do.
- An ethos of encouraging behaviours that facilitate improved customer confidence.

How will we provide fair and equal access for all customers?

We have a duty to provide fair and equal access to all our services for all our customers. The Customer Services Strategy and customer service improvement plans will facilitate:

- Services that are socially inclusive to everyone in Rossendale.
- Improved compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act.
- The progressive implementation of the Race Equality Standard for customers.
- The successful implementation of access to information provided through the Freedom of Information Act.
- Improvements in relation to the Liveability issues.
- Improved access to Council services for everyone, particularly in terms of physical access and longer hours of availability.

How will we constantly improve service standards?

We will need to ensure that we become a learning organisation that develops a continuous improvement ethos by:

- Being creative and innovative, and using stretch targets for local and Best Value Key Performance Indicators.
- Working together smartly, sharing customer data intelligence.
- Looking at the wider picture, developing a more holistic approach.
- Looking at and adapting best practise elsewhere.

How will we empower employees?

Staff are one of our greatest assets. They will be nurtured and encouraged to take responsibility and actions that centre on customer needs and our corporate priorities by:

- Ensuring comprehensive training and development programmes.
- Delegating decision making to front line employees with support.
- Encouraging and acting on feedback from all staff.
- Implementing reward and recognition schemes.

How will we measure and monitor performance?

It is vital that we can demonstrate our performance against our targets. We will do this by ensuring that:

- Comprehensive performance management systems are implemented corporately.
- Customer service performance measures are publicised frequently.
- Customer consultation improves.
- Regular 'Mystery Shopper' exercises are carried out.
- All Services adopt corporate customer standards and set smart targets.
- Business Plans for Services follow a common format.
- Improvements in customer services are celebrated internally and publicised externally.

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1 THE NEED FOR A STRATEGY

1.1 Background and Context

Rossendale Council is changing. We have a robust vision for the future, new corporate priorities, and a new operational structure. Most importantly we have a growing willingness for change and a desire to improve on our previous performance, particularly to improve our customer services.

At the same time, the Government is committed to delivering major reforms in public services and our customers have high expectations that continue to grow, driven in part by changing business practices and changing lifestyles.

These demands mean that Rossendale Council must undertake nothing less than a total transformation. We must aim high, be ambitious and strive for excellence, particularly in our customer services. Our goal is to have eight out of ten customers satisfied with our services by 2008 and eight out of ten of our corporate priority indicators performing as well as the best.

This Strategy has been formulated in response to the Council's previous Comprehensive Performance Assessment and the Best Value Review of Customer Services that took place during the later part of 2004. It delivers a key part of the new corporate Strategy (improved customer services) and underpins all other corporate priorities.

Customer service is so fundamental to everything that the Council does, that a successful customer services Strategy will support all of the other corporate priorities and continually drive service improvements.

Good customer service means doing what we said we would, whilst treating both internal and external customers with respect, courtesy and friendliness - in short treating people in the way that you would like to be treated yourself.

The recent Best Value Review identified that only 27% of our customers were satisfied and that there were significant shortcomings in the Council's approach to customer service, particularly in comparison with other service providers. The review produced a comprehensive and detailed gap analysis and improvement plan that is currently being implemented.

However, we do not want to be constantly reacting to external pressures. We want to plan for a future where we are delivering high quality, responsive customer service for all our customers. This Strategy will help us to deliver services that we can be truly proud of, knowing that we are delivering what our customers deserve – the best.

1.2 Adaptability and Relevance

This Strategy is not set in stone. It will change over time as we learn more about what our customers want, and how we can deliver it for them. It will also change in response to technological progress, new business processes, political change and new commercial and competitive influences.

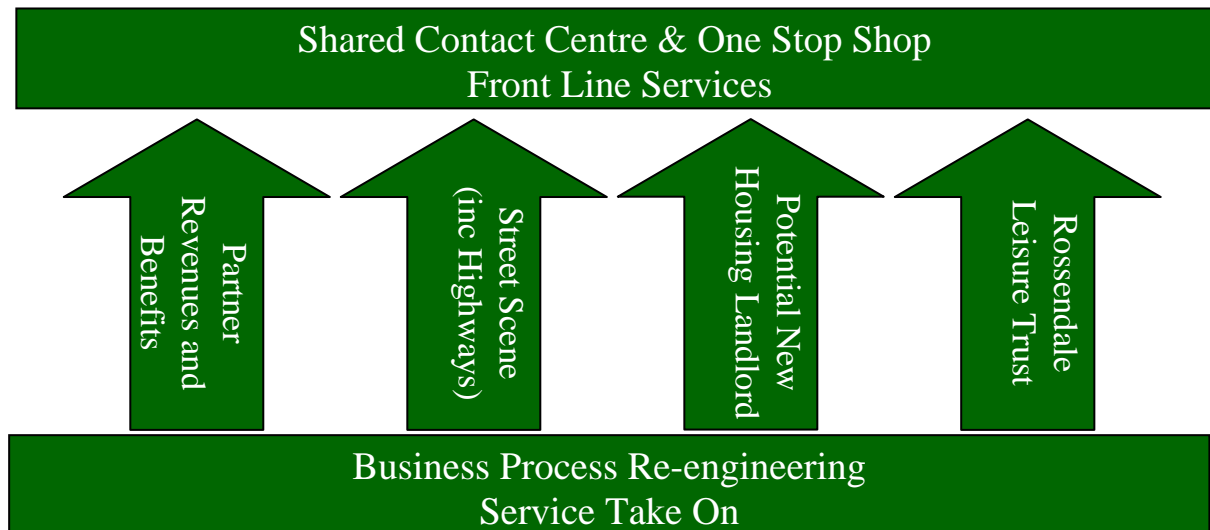
The Strategy covers a three to five year period, but will be formally reviewed annually to ensure its continued relevancy.

1.3 Linkages

This Strategy complements several other Council strategies including the consultation Strategy, the communications Strategy and the equality policy.

It is a higher level Strategy providing a generalised framework of principles, priorities and processes. It will guide the work of a number of projects and project groups involved in drawing up a series of complementary action plans, improvements plans, and business plans. Through the business planning process it will become embedded within the delivery of every Council service, ensuring co-ordination and consistency across all services, including those that have been outsourced.

The diagram below provides a visual representation of the possible configuration of service provision in Rossendale in the future.



1.4 Our Customers

Our customers are everyone who has contact with the Council, including current and potential residents, visitors to Rossendale, local business people, strategic partners, contractors and suppliers, government agencies, Members and employees. They want a high quality, accessible, professional, seamless service. To deliver this, we must ensure that this Strategy co-ordinates the work of many interdependent people across the Council.

Rossendale's population varies greatly. There are significant rural and urban populations. The proportion of elderly and young people is comparatively high. Unemployment is low but household income is also low. Despite having a relatively small ethnic minority population our customers use several different preferred languages.

1.5 Strategic Influences

The Strategy is influenced by a number of current issues including:

- Our desire to provide better services.
- Higher customer expectations.
- Changing customer needs and working patterns.
- New technology.
- E-government delivery.
- Legislation on race equality, disability, and freedom of information.
- Limited resources.
- An increase in partnership working or use of external service providers.
- Comprehensive performance assessment and best value.
- Housing stock transfer.

1.6 Our Culture

The culture of an organisation can determine the nature of the customer service provided. We recognise that for many services our customers do not have a choice of service provider. This has led, in the past, to a culture that does not put the customer first.

However, our culture is changing. We now recognise that we have an obligation to provide high quality services and where possible to give customers a choice.

We will adopt a customer care ethos that puts customers first and delivers services that meet, and exceed customer expectations. Through this Strategy we are aiming to create a culture that is based on the following values:

- Customer focused, quality orientated.
- Keeping our promises and consistency.
- Best value and efficient.
- Accessible, equal and fair.
- Accountable – corporately and personally.
- Performance orientated.
- Customer and Community involvement, consultation and feedback.
- Choice.
- Learning from the best and striving for excellence and improvement.
- Staff involvement and empowerment.

Nothing less that cultural change is required to embed these principles within the culture of the Council and its staff.

2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES FOR CUSTOMER SERVICES

The overall aim of this Strategy is to: 'Provide excellent customer services for all customers and increase customer satisfaction by putting customers first, at all times, and for all their transactions with the Council.'

This overall aim is broken down into the following key objectives:

1. Increasing our customer satisfaction rating to 30% during 2006, 50% during 2007 and 80% during 2008 by adopting best practice and learning for our customer information and feedback.
2. Facilitating a cultural change within the Council by providing services that are customer focused and being more willing to take responsibility for meeting customer needs rather than designing services for the convenience of the service provider.
3. Establishing a clear set of customer promises that are linked to a monitorable set of customer service standards, and applied consistently across all Council services, including those provided by partners and contractors.
4. Investing in new technology and staff training that will deliver high quality services and reduce the number of customer transactions that cannot be resolved within one customer contact.
5. Treating every customer equally, whatever their age, ethnic origin, religion, gender, disability or sexuality.

To achieve these aims we must:

1. Initiate cultural change within the Council, particularly with regard to working practices.
2. Understand our customers needs and expectations and provide them with choice.
3. Keep our promises to our customers and be willing to be held to account for our actions.
4. Constantly improve service standards and the quality of our services.
5. Establish and maintain a common approach to customer service across the Council and through our partners, contractors and suppliers.
6. Empower employees to delivery high quality services in a friendly, approachable way by providing effective training and support.
7. Provide simple, fair and equal access for all customers.
8. Clearly identify roles and responsibilities.
9. Measure and monitor performance against agreed targets and standards.
10. Manage budgets and resources efficiently and effectively.
11. Learn from the best and improve our services as a result.
12. Ensure that improvement is maintained and new challenges are addressed through an annual review and planning cycle that takes account of customer information and feedback.
13. Work with our partners and contracts who provide services on behalf of the Council to help them deliver this Strategy.
14. Introduce new customer service technology.

Key indicators

A local performance indicator will measure overall customer satisfaction.

3 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

3.1 Members

The Executive will agree the Strategy and be responsible for scrutinising reports regarding its implementation. Members will also need to ensure that they are receiving regular monitoring reports about the performance of customer services and levels of customer satisfaction. Members can also champion the needs and expectation of our customers.

3.2 Employee responsibilities

Employees are responsible for delivering customer services. They need to ensure that they are familiar with the customer promises and customer service standards and able to deliver them. All employees should focus on providing excellent customer service as their number one priority.

3.3 Change Management Group/Customer Services Steering Group

Senior officers and experienced staff with customer services experience will direct this Strategy and oversee the development and implementation of major customer services projects.

Through the Head of Customer Services and E-Government the group will report to senior management team and the Executive. The group will provide progress reports on the implementation of the Strategy and major customer service projects. The group will also be able to make recommendations for action to improve customer services.

Large corporate customer service projects may have their own project board that reports back to the Change Management Group.

3.4 Service area responsibilities

All services areas are responsible for improving customer services and all services should adopt common standards, processes and procedures for customer care. One post within each service should be designed as a Customer Services Champion, with responsibility for promoting this Strategy within the service. This will be formally monitored to ensure that the Strategy is being implemented.

3.5 Head of Customer Services and E-Government responsibilities

The Head of Customer Services and E-Government will lead and provide management focus for all aspects of customer services including:

- Leading, monitoring and reviewing this Strategy.
- Promoting a customer service ethos across the Council.
- Ensuring that customer service is considered as a factor in the corporate decision making process.

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- Leading corporate customer services projects and assessing the feasibility of new technology or techniques to improve customer service.
 - Performance management of this Strategy and more detailed projects and action plans.
 - Coordinating the production of annual plans for customer services and supporting service areas to develop their own customer services plans and proposals that are consistent with this Strategy.

3.6 Senior Management Team

Senior managers are responsible for ensuring that their services are delivering this Strategy, and for overcoming any barriers to the successful adoption of the Strategy that cannot be overcome by other employees. Senior managers should monitor the progress on implementing this Strategy and ensure that all their future business and service planning takes account of this Strategy and the needs of customers.

3 CUSTOMER SERVICE VALUES

We want to achieve a consistent approach to customer services which is based on the same set of values. These include:

- Customer focused, quality orientated.
- Keeping our promises and consistency.
- Best value and efficient.
- Accessible, equal and fair.
- Accountable – corporately and personally.
- Performance orientated.
- Customer and Community involvement, consultation and feedback.
- Choice.
- Learning from the best and striving for excellence and improvement.
- Staff involvement and empowerment.

By applying these values to all of our services we will begin to create a customer care ethos that puts customers first and delivers services that meet, and exceed customer expectations.

It is vital that these values are widely understood by employees, contactors, partners, suppliers, Members and customers so that they can be applied consistently to all service areas.

Although each service will have its own individual service standards, these values can be applied to all customer focused activity so that all of our services are consistently good or excellent.

To support the implementation of this Strategy, the Council will be developing its brand and image over the next 12 months, so that more customers will consistently associate Rossendale Council with providing excellent customer services.

4 CUSTOMER PROMISES

Customers have expectations of the service that they receive. Customers who expect, and then receive, good service, are more likely to be satisfied, partly because they feel that we have kept our 'promise' to deliver a service in a particular way.

This Strategy explicitly sets out a series of promises to our customers about what they can expect. By publishing these promises and through additional customer service standards, and individual service area promises, we are empowering our customers to hold us to account for providing good customer service.

A summary of the key promises is show below.

1. We will provide a fair, equal, accessible and unbiased service irrespective of race, colour, religion, age, gender, disability or sexuality.
2. We will deliver the highest quality, most efficient, service that resources will allow, even when we are busy or staff are off work.
3. We will be courteous and friendly and listen to what you want.
4. We will provide our services through different channels including the telephone, the post, the internet and in person at our offices at times that are convenient to our customers.
5. We will aim to resolve 80% of customer transactions at the first point of contact.
6. Our customer service standards will apply to our partners and contractors who deliver services on behalf of the Council.
7. We will introduce common standards for answering the telephone, responding to letters and emails, and arranging and undertaking home visits.
8. We will project a common image through our letterheads, standard letters, publications, leaflets and other sources of information.
9. We will improve customer services by introducing a customer relationship management system as part of the Shared Services Contact Centre.
10. We will provide all of our customer services on one telephone number – 01706 217777 from January 2006.
11. We will meet the Government's target of providing all our customer services electronically by the end of 2005.
12. We will widely publicise consistent contact information for all Council services.
13. We will widely publicise the address and locations of all the places where the Council provides customer services.
14. A full range of Council leaflets and publications will be available at all customer service transaction points.
15. We will use plain clear language at all times that is straight forward and easy to understand. We will aim to aim to get the crystal mark for our main customer service publications.

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16. We will publish performance information about our services and aim to maintain or improve our performance standards over time compared with the best public and private sector customer services.
 17. Our customer service performance will be independently verified.
 18. We will publicise details of our compliments and suggestions scheme and dealt with any complaints as quickly and as fairly as possible.
 19. We will use your feedback to improve customer services.
 20. We will consult with you through a range of different channels to assess your customer needs and expectations.
 21. We will improve our services by using information provided by our customer services monitoring systems and analysing information about customer transactions.
 22. We will improve our customer service by learning best practice from other providers of high quality customer care.
 23. Our staff will receive training in customer care, diversity and equal opportunities, and will be involved in developing service standards and performance indicators that are appropriate to their services.
 24. Our staff are responsible for ensuring that customers are satisfied with the service being provided. They will be given the right tools, information and IT systems to be able to provide an excellent customer service.
 25. The Customer Services Steering Group will monitor the implementation of this Strategy and all customer service improvement projects with a particularly focus on monitoring the delivery of customer care as it is perceived by the customer.

5 ACCESSIBLE, FAIR SERVICES FOR ALL OUR CUSTOMERS

Our customers are diverse and varied, with different backgrounds, needs and capabilities. They have a right to expect that we will do our best to meet their needs as part of our desire to provide excellent and socially inclusive customer care. Our customer service Strategy is based on values such as equality of opportunity, choice, and customer and community involvement. We want to empower our customers so that they know that they have the right to expect a certain standard of customer service that meets their particular needs.

5.1 Customer promises

- You have the right to receive a fair, equal, accessible and unbiased service irrespective of race, colour, religion, age, gender, disability or sexuality.
- We will provide information to customers in their preferred language or format and provide translation and interpretation services for customers with special requirements.
- All new Council buildings will be family friendly and accessible to people with disabilities.
- Customers who have sight problems can receive information from the Council in large print, on tape or in Braille.
- Customers with a hearing problem will have access to Minicom and induction loop facilities.
- We will make our website accessible to people who have sight problems by adopting common accessibility standards including the W3C standard and the 'A standard' promoted by the Government.

5.2 Service delivery

- New staff and newly elected Members will receive training in customer care and diversity, and will gain an understanding of the customer services Strategy and the equalities Strategy. Our partners and contractors who provide Council services will also adopt these standards as well as being expected to demonstrate their commitment to customer care and diversity.
- We will monitor complaints that focus on unequal or impolite service separately from complaints about other service standards or customer expectations.

5.3 Targets

- We will reduce the number of justified complaints about our customer services not being accessible.
- We will aim to eliminate complaints about customers being treated differently as a result of their race, colour, religion, age, gender, disability or sexuality.

6 SERVICE STANDARDS

Our customers have the right to expect certain minimum standards of customer service that are applied consistently across the whole Council. Our approach to customer service is outlined in this section including our customer promises, the way we will deliver customer services and our improvement targets. We recognise that our customers will want to contact us in different ways, by telephone, over the internet or in person, and that they will want us to deliver services to them in different ways. In addition to the general standards that apply to all of these delivery methods, this chapter sets out specific customer service standards for individual methods of service delivery.

6.1 Customer promises

- We will deliver the highest quality, most efficient, service that resources will allow.
- You have the right to customer service that is courteous and friendly.
- You have the right to be listened to.
- You have the right to be able to request and receive our services through different channels including the telephone, the post, the internet and in person at our offices.
- We will review the opening hours of customer service venues and telephone based services with a view to extending them.
- Our customer services staff will aim to resolve 80% of customer transactions at the first point of contact. Our emphasis will be on keeping transaction levels to a minimum by getting them right first time.
- You have the right to expect good customer service even when we are busy or staff are off work.
- Our customer service standards should apply to our partners and contractors who deliver services on behalf of the Council.

6.2 Service delivery

- We will introduce common standards for answering the telephone, responding to letters and emails, and arranging and undertaking home visits.
- We will project a common image through our letterheads, standard letters, publications, leaflets and other sources of information.
- We will regularly re-assess resource levels, transaction numbers and processing times to ensure that we are providing the best possible customer service and keeping our promises.
- We will organise our staff and resources to meet customer demands even during the busiest times.
- We will make contingency arrangements to deliver services to customers even where there are exceptional situations such as high levels of sickness.
- We will improve customer services by introducing a customer relationship management system as part of the Shared Services Contact Centre.

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- We will investigate the possibility of providing customer services through web based self service kiosks.
 - We will review all contracts to ensure that they provide the same standard of customer service as the Council. All new contracts for services will include customer service standards and monitoring systems.

6.3 Targets

- A year on year reduction in the number of customers who have to contact us more than once to complete a customer transaction.

6.4 When you contact us - Personal contacts

6.4.1 Customer promises

- We will provide our customer services quickly and efficiently.
- Our customer services staff will all wear a uniform and a name badge.
- Our One Stop Shop service staff will aim to resolve your customer service request without further assistance.
- If our One Stop Shop service staff cannot resolve your customer service request we will arrange an appointment for you with someone who can.
- We will provide private, sound proofed facilities if you have confidential business that you wish to discuss.

6.4.2 Service delivery

- We will develop a 'one-stop-shop' method of delivering customer services in the major market towns, in conjunction with other suppliers of services.
- We will introduce an appointment system that all customer service staff can access.
- We will monitor the number of customer services appointments that are made and kept.

6.4.3 Targets

- More than 80% of all personal visitors should have their request for customer service dealt with within 15 minutes of arriving at our offices.

6.5 When you contact us – by phone

6.5.1 Customer promises

- You can access all of our customer services on one telephone number – 01706 217777 from January 2006.

-
- In the meantime you can access our most frequently requested services using the short range of phone numbers published in the BT phonebook and publicised elsewhere.
 - We will aim to answer your call within 20 seconds.
 - If you leave a message on voice mail we will respond to you within 2 working days.
 - If you leave a message on voicemail for members of staff who is absent or on leave we will make arrangements for a colleague of that person to pick the message up.
 - If you call our emergency out-of-hours phone number we will aim to provide a quick and speedy resolution to your problem.

6.5.2 Service delivery

- Voice mail must be checked once a day, including the voice mail of any colleagues who are out of the office.
- We will monitor the response times for the resolution of issues routed to the emergency out-of-hours phone line.

6.5.3 Targets

- All incoming calls to be answered within 20 seconds.
- Responding to all voice mail messages within 2 working days.

6.6 When you contact us – through our website and by email

6.6.1 Customer promises

- From January 2006, all our main customer services will be provided through the Council's website at www.rossendale.gov.uk.
- From January 2006, you can also request customer service by emailing us at – customerservice@rossendalebc.gov.uk

6.6.2 Service delivery

- We will improve our website and have a greater focus on customer needs and customer services.
- We will promote our website through all the Council's communication channels as a way for customers to obtain services from the Council.
- We will regularly review the performance of our information technology services and negotiate better performance from our IT contract with Vivista.

6.6.3 Targets

- Providing all our main customer services over the internet by January 2006.

7 CUSTOMER INFORMATION

Providing good, clear, information about our customer services is a vital part of making our services accessible and enabling our customers to hold us to account for the quality of our services. By providing reliable information that is written in a way that customers can easily understand we will help to increase the overall level of customer satisfaction and encourage a greater take up of services.

7.1 Customer promises

- We will widely publicise consistent contact information for all Council services.
- We will widely publicise the address and locations of all the places where the Council provides customer services.
- A full range of Council leaflets and publications will be available at all customer service transaction points.
- Our main customer service publications will be written in plain language and we will aim to get the Crystal Mark for these publications.

7.2 Service delivery

- All Council publications must support the delivery of the Customer Service Strategy, particularly by providing contact information for Council services.
- We will maintain an adequate stock of all Council leaflets and publications at all times.
- We will use plain, clear language at all times.

7.3 Targets

- Achieving the Crystal Mark for our main customer service publications.
- Not running out of Council leaflets and publications at offices providing customer services.

8 PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

As a Council we are committed to a comprehensive performance management regime. Our Customer Services Strategy identifies the range and depth of customer service information that will be collected in order to provide us with firm information on which to base future decisions about services. This Strategy will measure customer service standards through a range of best value and local performance indicators.

8.1 Customer promises

- We will set ourselves meaningful, realistic and challenging performance targets based on the service standards outlined in this Strategy and developed by individual customer services.
- You have the right to receive information about the performance of our services and the standards we have set.
- We will provide monthly performance information for our main customer services standards.
- We will publicise our performance information through a wide range of communication channels including our citizens newsletter (at least three times each year), press releases (at least four times each year), annual service reviews, the internet, and notice boards at customer service transaction points.
- We will aim to maintain or improve our performance standards.
- The performance of our customer services will be independently verified.
- We are willing to commission services from outside the Council if they can be provided to a higher quality through external partnerships or commissioning.

8.2 Service delivery

- Our customer service processes and ICT systems will be integrated in a way which allows us to monitor and measure meaningful customer services information and supports our performance management system.
- The use of the current FLARE database will be reviewed and proposals made for ways to produce more meaningful customer service information.
- We will use mystery shopping exercises to provide independent monitoring and scrutiny of our customer services and ensure the consistency and quality of our services is maintained or improved.
- We will formally test the market for services where it has previously been shown that improvements can be made by external suppliers.

8.3 Targets

- Benchmarking our customer service performance against the best public and private sector providers on a bi-annual basis.

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- Publicising performance information in our citizens newsletter at least three times each year and in press releases at least four times each year.
 - Quarterly mystery shopping exercise.
 - We will increase performance targets over time for each service.

9 CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS, COMPLIMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

By making a series of customer promises we expect that customers will want to hold us to account if we fail to meet them.

We also believe that customer complaints, compliments and suggestions can be used positively to help us to improve our services in the future

The customer complaints procedure outlined below provides dissatisfied customers with a means of redress. For the system to work well and to provide comparative information from different services all complaints must be recorded in the same way and must be well understood by customers, staff and Members.

9.1 Customer promises

- You have the right to information about our service standards and our complaints procedure.
- We will provide a highly visible complaints, compliments and suggestions scheme.
- We will personally respond to all customer comments, suggestions and compliments.
- We will respond to customer complaints within the following timescales:
 - We will provide an acknowledgement within 5 working days.
 - We will provide a full response within 15 working days.
- We will demonstrate examples of services changing in response to customer feedback.

9.2 Service delivery

- We will ensure that employees and Members are fully aware of the public complaints procedure and that customer services staff can use the correct processes and systems to deal with complaints, compliments and suggestions.
- We will widely publicise our service standards and complaints procedures so that our customers have a means of redress if our services fail to meet their high expectations.
- We will use our complaints, compliments and suggestions scheme to monitor and measure customer service and provide useful feedback for services. We will identify examples of services that have improved as a result of this process.
- We will monitor complaints that focus on unequal or impolite service separately from complaints about other service standards or customer expectations.

9.3 Targets

- All complaints must be acknowledged within 5 working days of receipt.
- All complainants must receive a full response within 15 working days.
- We will reduce the number of justified complaints about our customer services not being accessible.
- We will aim to eliminate complaints about customers being treated differently as a result of their race, colour, religion, age, gender, disability or sexuality.
- Fewer than 2% of complaints that are deemed 'justified' are directed against individual members of staff. We will aim to improve this target year on year.

10 IMPROVING SERVICES

Our Customer Services Strategy requires a culture of continuous improvement in our services. We will review our performance and identify ways to improve our services through two distinct processes. Firstly, by identifying customer needs and expectations, and secondly, by learning from experience.

10.1 Identifying customer needs and expectations

We will use a range of consultation processes to improve our customer services. Consultation is crucial for understanding what customers want, their needs, and expectations. Through the corporate consultation Strategy the Council now has the 'Rossendale Speaks Out Panel'. The panel involves a diverse range of customers and stakeholders, giving them the opportunity to comment on our services.

10.1.1 Customer promises

- We will consult you to assess your customer needs and expectations.
- We will ensure that you can respond to our consultation activities through a range of different channels – whatever you are most comfortable with.
- We will collect and analyse information about customer transactions and use it to improve services.
- We will strive to keep pace with changes in your expectations and needs.

10.1.2 Service delivery

- The annual customer survey and additional customer consultation will be used to help improve services.
- Customers should be able to respond to our consultation activity through a range of different channels including written comments, face to face contact, or electronic communication.
- We will provide opportunities for all of stakeholders to contribute to our improvement process.

10.1.3 Targets

- We will aim for more than 80% of our customers agreeing in the annual customer survey that they understand the service standards that we have published.
- All customer service targets will be reviewed annually with a view to improving performance each year.

10.2 Learning from experience

We will learn from our colleagues elsewhere and from other business sectors.

10.2.1 Customer promises

- This Strategy will be reviewed annually to ensure that it is still driving the delivery of constantly improving customer services.
- We will improve our services by using information provided by our customer services monitoring systems and analysing information about customer transactions.
- We will compare good performing customer services with poorly performing services to help us identify service improvements.
- We will improve our customer services by adopting examples of good practice from within the Council, and externally, from recognised providers of high quality customer care, provided that the new ideas can be applied efficiently, economically and effectively.
- We will undertake customer consultation and use a range of feedback mechanisms to identify your customer service needs and expectations.

10.2.2 Service delivery

- Councillors will be involved in reviewing this Strategy annually, making use of information provided through our customer services monitoring systems.
- We will record, monitor and analyse our customer service transactions and use the information to improve our customer services.
- All our customer service functions will collate similar information about transaction volumes and costs.
- We will identify examples of good practice within our customer services, and champion them within the Council using a range of established internal communication channels including Grapevine, e-mail and the intranet.
- All examples of good practice in customer services and customer care will be available to all our staff through a database.

10.2.3 Targets

- Review the customer services Strategy annually.
- Introduce common customer service monitoring systems across all Council services by January 2006.
- Establish a good practice database by June 2006.

11 INVOLVING OUR STAFF IN DELIVERING EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICES

This Strategy relies on our staff to implement it. We cannot improve our customer services if our staff are not committed to this goal. Unfortunately not all of our staff are yet committed to providing excellent customer services and there may be an unwillingness to change policies and procedures that are a barrier to good customer service.

This Strategy sets out a clear vision, and principles and guidelines, for the sort of customer service we want our staff to deliver. As a result of the Strategy we want to empower our staff to take greater pride in, and responsibility for, customer satisfaction and resolving our customer's problems.

The Customer Services Strategy recognises we must support our staff with extra resources and training to enable them to provide a first class service to all our customers. The Strategy also recognises that involving staff in developing customer service standards and allowing them to suggest ways to improve customer services is the most effective way to gain their commitment.

11.1 Staff rights

- Staff will have a safe and secure working environment.
- Staff will receive training in customer care, diversity and equal opportunities.
- New staff will receive induction training which includes information about common systems and processes used by the Council to deliver customer services.
- Staff will be given the right tools, information and IT systems to be able to provide an excellent customer service.
- Staff will be involved in developing service standards and performance indicators that are appropriate to their services.
- We will consult staff about projects and plans relating to customer services and at least one member of staff from each customer service area will be involved in future customer service projects and plans.
- We will establish a regular programme of staff meetings in each service area to discuss performance against targets, outstanding problems or complaints, and plans for the future to improve customer services.
- Staff should feel that they have had an opportunity to provide feedback to managers about ways to improve customer service.
- Managers will be obliged to formally respond to all staff suggestions for improving customer service.

11.2 Staff responsibilities

- All staff are responsible for ensuring that customers are satisfied with the service being provided.
- All staff are responsible for implementing the relevant parts of this customer services Strategy.

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- Customer Services Staff should empower customers to be able to use our customer promises to maximise their customer service experience.
 - Performance management will be used to reinforce the responsibilities that staff have for providing high quality customer services.

11.3 Targets

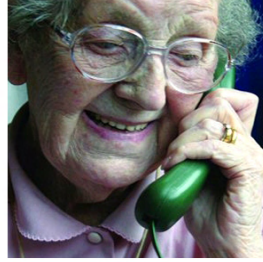
- Customer service training for all customer service staff within 12 months of this Strategy being approved.
- Less than 1% of staff reporting abuse from customers.
- In the annual staff survey 80% of staff should feel that they have had the opportunity to provide feedback to managers about customer service issues.
- Low staff absence levels particularly through work related stress or illness.
- Fewer than 2% of complaints that are deemed 'justified' are directed against individual members of staff.
- A year on year reduction in the number of customers who have to contact us more than once to complete a customer transaction.

12 MONITORING AND IMPLEMENTATION ARRANGEMENTS

Every successful Strategy requires a strong team to oversee its successful implementation and delivery. The Customer Services Steering Group fulfils this roll.

- The Customer Services Steering Group will monitor the implementation of this Strategy, including all the targets identified in each section.
- All customer service improvement projects will be monitored by the Customer Services Steering Group.
- The Customer Services Steering Group will particularly focus on monitoring the delivery of customer care as it is perceived by the customer.
- Through rigorous monitoring, 90% of all customer service projects will be delivered on time and on budget.

In addition to the activities outlined above, this group will play a key part in getting individual services areas to integrate the relevant parts of this Strategy into their annual Business Plans and Service Plans.



**Rossendale Borough Council
Customer Service Standards**



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Introduction by Owen Williams, Chief Executive and Duncan Ruddick, Leader

We aim to provide high quality services to all our customers.

As a Council, we deliver a wide range of services and aim to deliver and develop services to meet customer's needs.

Improving Customer Care and setting clear standards is a key part of our Corporate Improvement Plan, which aims to make us a fair Council through:

- Focusing on customer needs
- Meeting customers' priorities
- Trying to develop innovative solutions
- Delivering what matters to local people

This handbook sets out the standard we will deliver to customers and the standards expected from you.

Owen Williams

Chief Executive



Duncan Ruddick

Leader – Rossendale Borough Council



Customer Promise

Our Customers Service Aim is:

'To put customers first, at all times and at every point of contact'

As a Council we will:

- Provide excellent customer service to **all** our customers
- Put customers **first** at every point of contact and increasing the number of enquires that are resolved at the first point of contact with the Council
- Deliver services designed for customers and not for the convenience of service providers
- Become more customer focused by helping to facilitate a cultural change within the Council
- Provide a consistent approach to Customer Service across the Council
- Aim to ensure that more of our customers associate providing Rossendale BC with professional high quality services
- Ensure that these corporate customer service standards are consistently applied across all service areas
- Provide a customer service that is as good as the best
- Set tough customer service targets, measure customer satisfaction and report our customer service standards in a consistent and efficient way
- Improve customer satisfaction levels across the council

Good Customer Services

We are committed to providing high quality, accessible services to our customers.

Standards

First impressions are important. From the first contact with our customers, we will ensure that:

- All staff are trained in the highest level of customer service standards.
- Aim to resolve your query first time.
- We deal with your enquiries in a calm, concise and polite manner
- All our reception staff are trained in British Sign Language & lip reading skills
- Our staff provide assistance to all our customers
- We have facilities for customers with physical and sensory impairments
- We have private interview facilities
- We are responsible and accountable for the accuracy and quality of our work.
- We provide you with a full update, on request, to any enquiries you make
- We have a Corporate procedure for your Suggestions, Compliments and Complaints

Monitoring methods

We will use a variety of methods to ensure we are performing to this high standard including customer satisfaction surveys, mystery shopping and observations by managers, and we will report our performance regularly.

Customer Service Standards for Telephone Calls & Voicemail

We aim to ensure that we answer all phone calls promptly, politely and within 20 seconds.

Standards

- We aim to answer your call promptly and in a clear, concise and friendly manner.
- We will identify ourselves and our service at the start of your call and on our voicemail message, which includes saying:
 - Good Morning (or afternoon)
 - Rossendale Council
 - Your section
 - Your name
- We will repeat back to you your details to ensure accuracy
- If you request feedback on how we are progressing with your query we will provide details within 1 working day
- If we need to obtain more information to resolve your enquiry we will call you back within 1 working day
- After your call we will take responsibility for the actions and timescales agreed.
- We will ensure that answer phone greetings are in line with our corporate guide lines
- If you leave a voice mail message and include your contact details we will call you back within 1 working day

Monitoring methods

We will use a variety of methods to ensure we are performing to this high standard including customer satisfaction surveys, mystery shopping and observations by managers, and we will report our performance regularly.

Customer Service standards for Personal Callers and Visitors to Rossendale Borough Council

We are committed to providing high quality services that can be accessed by all our customers

Standards

- We will provide a polite, welcoming and efficient "drop in" and appointment service
- We will deal with your enquiries in a calm, concise and polite manner.
- We will keep waiting times down to a minimum
- We will be responsible and accountable for the accuracy and quality of our work
- Staff will deal with all requests impartially, and discretely whilst observing confidentiality
- Staff will receive the training and support required to deliver an excellent service
- Customer Service Advisors will wear a uniform and name badge so that you can identify them easily.

Monitoring methods

We will use a variety of methods to ensure we are performing to this high standard including customer satisfaction surveys, mystery shopping and observations by managers, and we will report our performance regularly.

Customer Service standards for Correspondence, E mail & Fax

All our communications will be clear, understandable and appropriate to the person receiving it

Standards

- You can contact us by post, e-mail, fax and via our website at www.rossendale.gov.uk
- All written and electronic communications will carry our corporate logo and comply with corporate standards
- We will respond to your written correspondence as soon as possible and a full response will be sent within 10 working days
- We will ensure that our response to you are accurate and easy to understand
- Written and electronic communications from us will include our postal address, email address, fax/telephone numbers and a named Officer who is dealing with your enquiry
- We offer you the choice of having any information you request via phone, mail (including e-mail) or faxed to you.
- We will acknowledge your e-mail within 1 day and advise you when we will respond fully to your request
- We will provide all relevant information in community languages, large print, and Braille or audio tape upon request.

Monitoring methods

We will use a variety of methods to ensure we are performing to this high standard including customer satisfaction surveys, mystery shopping's and observations by managers and we will report our performance regularly.

Customer Service Standards for Appointments and Home Visits

We are committed to providing a high quality service to all our customers

Standards

- Where appropriate we will make an appointment for a home visit upon request
- If we need to cancel an appointment with you, we will give you at least 1 day's notice

Monitoring methods

We will use a variety of methods to ensure we are performing to this high standard including customer satisfaction surveys, mystery shopping and observations by managers, and we will report our performance regularly.