

Customer Service Strategy



Introduction

Herefordshire Council knows that the way our customers, residents and businesses work and live today is changing rapidly, with digital technology having an impact on everyone's lives. We know that we need to improve our customer service offer, making it easier to contact the council.

We will harness the opportunity and benefits of new technology so that our customers have access 24/7 to as many of our services as possible, and give them the right information first time, quickly and easily. We will respond to increasing demand for our services by supporting customers to interact digitally and for those customers with more complex queries, we will continue to provide a high-quality service either via the phone or face to face depending on the customer's needs. Streamlining and simplifying the customer experience wherever possible to manage demand more effectively will also release capacity to support those with more complex needs.

Within the context of this strategy, our "customers" are anyone who needs or chooses to interact with us. This includes residents, businesses, visitors, partners, community groups and staff.



Our vision for customer service

Our vision is that we put our customers at the heart of what we do so that they benefit from accessible and high quality services, whether online, by telephone or face to face.

- increase the number of services available online, so customers can access them 24/7
- provide an improved and consistent customer experience across all services
- maximise the use of technology to improve customer access
- use customer insight and feedback data to develop and enhance service delivery
- secure high customer satisfaction levels

A core part of our strategy, in conjunction with our Digital Data and Technology Strategy, will be to improve our website and work with communities and partners to encourage residents, businesses and visitors to use digital self-service.

However our customers access the council, whether online, telephone or face to face, our aim is for them to receive a consistent and equitable experience.

INSIGHT



Herefordshire and our customers

Situated in the south west of the West Midlands region bordering Wales, Herefordshire has beautiful unspoilt countryside with remote valleys and rivers and a distinctive heritage. The county is served by five beautiful and distinctive market towns: Bromyard, Kington, Ledbury, Leominster and Ross-on-Wye. Understandably, the county is a popular destination for visitors and for those who commute to employment out of the county.

Herefordshire has the fourth lowest population density in England, with a land area of 2,180km² but a population of only 188,700 (2022). Most of the county (95%) is rural and 53% of the population live in rural areas. While life expectancy for both males and females is higher and mortality rates are lower here than the national average, there are pockets of deprivation in the county. We have a higher than average number of people over 65 living in the county.

Herefordshire is an entrepreneurial county, with 20% of the population being self-employed. Unemployment in the county is low, but average earnings in the county are significantly below both the regional and national averages. Average house prices are high compared with elsewhere in the region. In 2016, Herefordshire's affordable housing ratio was the worst in the West Midlands, with houses at the lower end of the market costing around 8.6 times the annual wage of the lowest earners. Herefordshire is generally a low crime rate area and partners work together to ensure that it continues to be a safe place to live.

The Herefordshire Council vision is that people, organisations and businesses will work together to bring sustainable prosperity and wellbeing for all, in the outstanding natural environment of Herefordshire. Its priorities are to:

- enable residents to live safe, healthy and independent lives
- keep children and young people safe and give them a great start in life
- support the growth of our economy
- secure better services, quality of life and value for money

Improving customers' experience of interacting with the council is a key element of the transformation programme – 'Thrive'. "Improving our customer offering" means we will provide a consistent, digital-first, customer-centred experience focused on resolving issues at the earliest opportunity. Support, when it is needed, is provided at the right time and right place.

Digital capacity in Herefordshire

Digital capacity is a complex picture in Herefordshire. The overall risk of digital exclusion is rated low compared with the UK average; however the county has some very rural communities where access to broadband is a key factor and other communities where there are significant demographic barriers driving digital exclusion. Libraries play a key role in enabling residents to access

digital services who may otherwise be unable to do so, and library staff are available to support residents to carry out their digital interactions.

Within this context, it is critical for the council to consider these factors carefully when designing and delivering digital services.

What do we know about our current customer experience?

We support 192,214 residents (population estimates mid 2019)		We have a number of online forms for our services but these require further work in the back office to resolve the customer query
Telephone is the most common method of contacting the council – over 60% of calls are routed through the main switchboard	In addition to the main switchboard, the council operates seven contact centres	
	We currently offer over 245 email addresses on our website	We have over 40 online customer-facing portals for making applications and requests
The council receives about 2,600 calls every day	Over 26,200 customers have set up an online account (MyAccount) with us	In 2022, 25,490 people visited our libraries where customers can access computers and Wi-Fi.



What we want to achieve

Due to the variety of contact channels and teams dealing with customer enquiries currently, there is no standard approach to customer contact and an inconsistent capture of valuable customer information to drive improvements in service.

Therefore, we want:

- to provide a positive experience for our customers by being open, transparent and fair
- our online services to be the channel of choice for most of our customers because they are so good
- to use other channels such as telephony and face to face for those who need them
- to create an environment where all officers are customer focused and take ownership of resolving customer queries
- to use data proactively to deliver intuitive solutions for the benefit of our customers, in order to reduce duplication and improve their experience

Information and advice on the council's website will be improved so that it can more effectively signpost customers. We will increase and improve options for self-service so that our workforce can focus on supporting those unable to use digital means and/or with complex queries.

We will encourage our customers to self-serve by making digital contact easy and efficient. Where customers do contact us, we will seek to resolve their queries on first contact and if necessary, ensure that customers are directed to the appropriate professional support quickly.

We recognise that a number of key frontline council services, such as waste collection, revenues and benefits, and highways, are delivered by our partners, and we will work with those partners to ensure that our customer service standards are consistent and equitable.



What you can expect from us

Short term – years 1 and 2	Medium term – years 3 and 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • we will ensure that our staff are competent in customer service and have an awareness of disabilities • we will develop and publish our customer service standards for all council services • we will review our top 10 high-volume customer ‘journeys’ to streamline and improve the end-to-end process and experience • we will continue to review our website and microsites and ensure that they all meet legal accessibility requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • we will continue to prioritise full digital access for the most popular service requests • we will put in place automated reminder texts and emails so you never miss a deadline or an appointment with us. • we will ensure that our online systems will be a first choice for most, meaning that our digital offer is the most used channel. • we will use data proactively to deliver intuitive solutions for the benefit of our customers

Measures of success

Our vision is ambitious and we need to ensure that we check and measure our progress across the lifetime of the strategy.

We will do this by listening and learning from customers’ experience to keep improving our services. Feedback will be gained through:

- customer surveys
- established community and disability groups
- compliments, complaints and enquiries
- feedback about equality issues

High-level measures of success for the strategy will be:

- percentage of customer requests that are fulfilled within the agreed timescale
- percentage of customers who complete their transaction digitally
- percentage of customers reporting a positive experience
- percentage reduction of complaints

A supporting annual action plan will be created which will be included in the council’s transformation programme. The progress on the action plan and performance against the success measures will be reported to the Corporate Leadership Team, Cabinet and Scrutiny Management Board.

