

# Customer Service Strategy



*“Serving Aberdeenshire from mountain to sea - the very best of Scotland”*

## **ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY**

(Approved by Policy and Resources Committee 20 September 2007)

### **Introduction**

This is Aberdeenshire Council's customer service strategy. It pulls together the existing, developing and planned elements of customer service in Aberdeenshire into a coherent and clearly documented whole.

Since its formation in 1995 Aberdeenshire Council has addressed customer service through the Customer Service Project Team (CSPT) and has developed and implemented a number of customer service initiatives over the years:

- Residents surveys, conducted biennially;
- Telephone answering guidelines;
- Mail response times;
- Plain Language guide;
- Comments Compliments and Complaints Scheme;
- Establishment of a Telephone Contact Centre;
- Customer Service Charter;
- Institute of Customer Service (ICS) training for staff in customer service;
- Customer Service Performance Indicators.

### **The Approach to a Customer Service Strategy**

While the elements of good customer service have either been in place since 1995 or have recently been developed as outlined above, there is no formalised strategy that pulls them together and places each element of Aberdeenshire's customer service in the larger coherent context of customer service. This is what this strategic plan does.

Typically a strategic plan for any organisation has an easy-to-follow structure of:

- Mission;
- Objectives;
- Goals;
- Strategies;
- Tactics;
- Performance Indicators.

Aberdeenshire Council's overall purpose or mission is set out in its vision,

“Serving Aberdeenshire from mountain to sea – the very best of Scotland”.

For any component part of that vision, for example for customer service, a strategic approach would set out the overall *objectives* for customer service, and then set out the long term and short term *goals* and the plans (*strategies*) for achieving (*tactics*) and measuring *performance* against these goals.

The elements of a customer service strategy can therefore be stated as:

- Objectives: Broad statements describing the targeted direction
- Goals: Quantifications of objectives for a specific time period

- Strategies: Statement of how the objectives will be achieved and the methods to be used
- Tactics: Specific steps to be taken to implement the strategies
- Performance Indicators: Measures of performance that show progress and monitor performance

## **Our Customer Service Strategy**

### Objectives

The broad statement of the way in which Aberdeenshire will handle customers is contained in the Customer Charter approved on 2 August 2007:

“Aberdeenshire Council is committed to providing high quality services and delivering high standards of customer service. As a customer of Aberdeenshire Council you have the right to be treated fairly and considerately when using any of our services whether in person, by phone, in writing or by e-mail. These standards outline the level of service you should expect and gives you the opportunity to challenge us if we do not deliver them.

We will deal with you as an individual and ensure that you are treated fairly and equally regardless of age, sex, race, religion, disability or sexual orientation.

When dealing with all customers we will

- Be friendly and accessible
- Understand your needs
- Meet your expectations wherever possible and explain when we cannot
- Treat you as we would expect to be treated ourselves
- Respect confidentiality
- Provide a quality service and work continually to improve this service
- Wear identity cards at all times

### Goals

CSPT at its meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2006 agreed 5 themes that had been developed by councillor/officer working group. These themes are in effect the goals that relate to the objectives set out above. They did not however have a time period attached but time scales have emerged in the process of these themes being taken forward.

The goals and associated timescales are as undernoted:

- Development of an Aberdeenshire Council customer service policy. This was achieved in September 2007

- Developing customer service skills in our staff. The timescale here is depended on other pressures on staff time but a time scale of the end of 2008 is thought to be realistic for all front line staff dealing directly with customers.
- Customer feedback loop. This is the core of Aberdeenshire council's customer service strategy and came into place during 2007.
- Making it easy for the customer to contact and interact with the council. This is an ongoing process, which is expected to be substantially complete by March 2009.
- Communicate service standards and performance to customers. Performance measures were published in December 2007 and annually thereafter.

## Strategies

For each of the five goals set out in the previous section CSPT determined a strategy to be employed to achieve each goal.

### Customer Service Policy

This has been achieved at corporate level with the approval of the Council's Customer Service Charter. All services have either adopted the corporate Customer Service Charter or adapted it to meet their specific service circumstances while meeting or bettering the standards of service set out in the Customer Service Charter.

### Developing staff and customer skills.

CSPT agreed that the means of achieving the necessary training would be membership of the Institute of Customer Service (ICS). The working group in its report to CPST on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2006 recommended that relevant employees be identified for early support through an appropriate ICS award of which three are available. These staff would be primarily those whose jobs involve dealing with the public on a face-to-face basis or by telephone. The first group would include all employees seconded to the contact centre; counter staff in area offices, libraries, cash counters; and other front desk staff.

A second group comprises operational staff who, although not normally in direct contact with the public, are responsible for dealing with matters raised by customers.

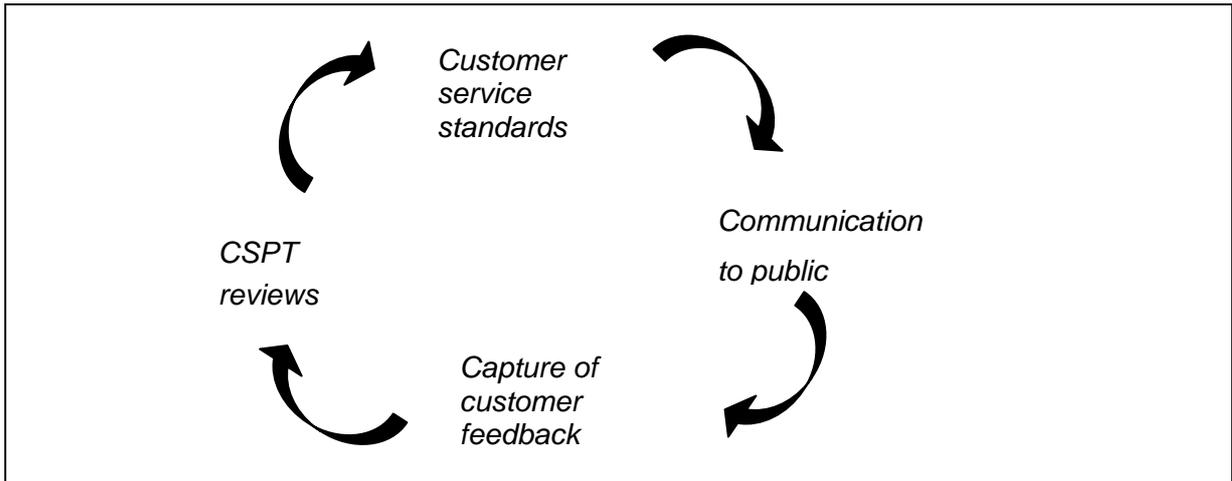
The next phase will make the ICS award available to all employees. Although it is not proposed that this would be compulsory, employees would be aware that their promotion prospects could be enhanced by the possession of the appropriate ICS award.

The working group also suggested that members of the management team undertake the ICS award to demonstrate their commitment to customer service through leading by example. Four members of the management team have achieved or are working towards ICS membership. The implementation of these recommendations is being undertaken by the development and training section of Personnel and ICT.

## Customer Feedback Loop

As mentioned above the customer feedback loop sits at the core of Aberdeenshire's customer service strategy. It involves the ongoing process of

- setting standards through customer service charter(s);
- communicating these to the public;
- capturing feedback through the customer feedback (complaints) scheme, residents surveys and other feedback;
- reviewing performance; and
- using the outcome of this review process to revise the customer service standards contained in the customer service charter.



## Making it easy for the customer to contact and interact with the council

This is an area of work that has been well developed. It is heavily dependent on the development of the various contact channels covering telephone, letter, e-mail, face-to-face, home visits, texts (SMS), website, and digital television. Full details of the proposals in this area are set out in the Customer First project board decision of 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2007 where 13 timed action points were approved running up to March 2009.

## Communication of service standards and performance

This is planned to be done in two ways. Firstly the Customer Service Charter is published in the A-Z of Council services on the Council's website and in other appropriate publications. The second aspect, performance, will be reported in the annual performance report which the council produces. The 2006/7 version which contains initial customer service performance reports was published at the end of 2007.

## Tactics

The specific action steps for each of the above strategies are contained in an action plan that is reviewed and updated regularly by Aberdeenshire Finance.

## Performance Measures

CSPT approached the issue of performance measures by using the concept of the customer service loop to act as a self-monitoring check on customer service performance. The most effective indicator of performance comes through the feedback arrangements using customer feedback itself. Rather than put in place an array of monitoring and measuring processes, it should be easy for customers to know the quality of service they should receive and easy for them to feed back how good or otherwise is the service they actually receive. In addition, a small number of performance indicators are in place and operating in the Council's telephone contact centre.

- % telephone calls answered within 20 seconds
- % of service requests resolved at the first point of contact
- Measurement of customer advisers' performance during calls

The performance measures are managed by Aberdeenshire Finance and reported regularly to Policy and Resources committee. There are no plans for further specific performance measures but these may be introduced as customer service develops further. The approach is to exercise a light but highly effective touch in monitoring performance rather than an overburdening framework of checks and reports.

**Charles Armstrong**  
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