

Customer Service Improvement Strategy 2013-16

1. Introduction

The world is changing, and Maidstone Borough Council needs to change too. Our customers expect services offered by the public sector to be more customer friendly, efficient, easily accessible and provided at a lower cost. Therefore, our long term vision for the future of customer service delivery is:

Customers can access high quality public services with confidence, at any time, wherever they are

This document sets out how we plan to work towards this vision over the next 3 years. We have planned actions and projects for the next three years, but this is a long term plan so things will change and projects will be added. More details will be added for years 2 and 3 when the Strategy is refreshed annually.

We plan to:

- Make our website more customer focussed and offer more services online
- Review each of our customer-facing services and make them more customer focussed and efficient
- Explore how to make the best use of our publicly accessible accommodation
- Refresh the standards and procedures for the collection, use, and secure storage of information we hold, including customer data
- Help residents and businesses who do not or cannot access the Internet by increasing digital skills and high speed Internet access

We cannot do this alone: whilst this is a strategy for Maidstone Borough Council, working with partners in the private, public, voluntary and community sectors will be key to achieving our goals for improved customer service delivery for the borough's residents and businesses and to achieving one of the Council's three priorities: Corporate and Customer Excellence.

2. Background

National context

Our experience and preferences for accessing information and services has significantly changed in the last few years. This in turn has consequences for how and when people choose to access information and services provided by Maidstone Council.

Internet usage

Recently published Government statistics confirm that in 2012, 42 million people in Great Britain have used the internet, which represents 85% of the population. Over two thirds (68%) of the population use the Internet every day, or almost every day. This represents double the number using the Internet every day in 2006, when records began. The South East region has the highest percentage of internet users other than London, with 88% of the South East population having used the Internet. Most Internet users are fairly regular users: 97% of those who had used in the Internet before had used it within the past three months.

Internet usage does vary with age, sex, disability status and, to a small extent, with income:

- Almost all adults aged 16-44 (over 97%) have used the Internet. This falls to around 92% for the 45-55 age group, 84% of those aged 55-64, 65% of those aged 65-74 and only 31% of the 75+ age group
- 1 in 3 disabled people have never used the Internet. This means disabled people are three times more likely to have never used the Internet than people without disabilities
- Men are slightly more likely than women to have used the Internet. The internet usage figures are very similar for men and women aged 16-64, but 70% of men compared to 60% of women aged 65-74 have used the internet, and the difference becomes even more pronounced for those aged 75 and over: 39% of men have used the internet compared to 25% of women
- 6% of adults employed and earning under £200 per week have never used the internet. For those earning £600 per week and over, the figure is less than 1%. Figures from Oxford Internet surveys (<http://microsites.oii.ox.ac.uk/oxis/>) suggest that unemployed people are less likely to use the internet than employed people.

Increasing use of mobile technology

Not only is internet use increasing, but the way people access the Internet is changing. Ten years ago, the only way most people could access the Internet was at home and work. However, the advent of smart phone, laptop and tablet

technology has made using the Internet at any time, any where, a reality. In 2012, almost six in ten adults (58%) accessed the Internet 'on the go', making use of Wifi hotspots or a mobile phone network. The proportion of adults using a mobile phone to access the Internet more than doubled between 2010 and 2012, from 24% to 51% and in 2012 32% of adults accessed the Internet using a mobile phone every day. It is more common for younger people to access the internet using a mobile phone or other hand held technology: in 2012 over 80% of 16-34 year olds accessed the Internet in this way, compared to 8% of those aged 65 and over.

Central government initiatives

Central Government are increasingly designing services that are 'digital by default', or are at least either easier or more advantageous for people to carry out online. The 2012 Budget states that the Government "will move to a 'digital by default' approach to its transactional services by 2015". Examples of this include the following:

- the Department of Work and Pensions have a target to achieve 80% of Universal Credit applications being made online from 2017.
- Tax returns can still be submitted to HM Revenue & Customs by paper, but the deadline is 3 months earlier than online returns.
- Car tax can be renewed online, with no need to show proof of car ownership or that the car has a current MOT as this information is checked automatically as part of the application

Therefore, the Council's customers will access central government services online much more often in the near future.

Race Online was an initiative founded by the Government appointed UK Digital Champion Martha Lane Fox. It sought to convince other organisations to take action to help millions more go online. The work to increase digital skills is continued through Go Online, a partnership of public and private sector organisations including the BBC, Age UK, E-On and the Post Office.

Funding cuts

In 2010 the Government announced its plans to reduce public spending by 25% and reduce the national deficit. This means substantial cuts in the funding that councils receive. This Council has to save around £3.9m over the next three years, which is a substantial reduction in the budget we have to spend on providing services for local people, at the same time that the number of potentially vulnerable people requiring some of those services, like housing advice and Housing and Council Tax Benefit, is increasing.

Economic downturn

The UK continues to experience difficult economic circumstances. For councils this means more people struggling to pay bills like Council Tax, as well as fewer

customers using paid for services, like town centre parking. Therefore, income from these services is less and money to run key services has to be found from elsewhere or services have to be cut.

Information management

Information is a key asset of the organisation and therefore must be looked after properly, well managed information is as secure, and as accessible as it realistically can be. Information includes both electronic and physical information and good information management encompasses all of those things we do with information – capturing, manipulating, organising, communicating and retrieving it.

All public organisations are legally obliged to protect any personal information they hold, and provide public access to official information. Information management helps the authority ensure compliance with this legislation; legislation that relates to information management includes:

- Data Protection Act 1998;
- Disability Discrimination Act 1995 etc;
- Human Rights Act 1998;
- Freedom of Information Act 2000;
- Re-Use of Public Sector Information Regulations 2005

The Information Commissioner is an independent authority which upholds information rights in the public interest, promoting openness by public bodies and data privacy for individuals. It actively monitors the performance of councils in meeting their legislative duties and will take enforcement action if the council fails to meet that duty.

The growth in technology and new ways of working means it is becoming increasingly difficult to ensure good information management and the need for good security and information sharing policies and procedures, as well as the ability to search and retrieve information more easily has become more significant. The consequences of not having these in place could be prosecution, financial loss or loss of reputation. The Information Commissioner recently published a document which highlighted that with the growth in technology, organisations were taking a 'Laissez Faire' attitude to the lack of security employed in the way employees are using this technology to store organisational information.

Local context

About Maidstone

Maidstone Borough is considered a good place to live and work with high rates of employment, relatively low levels of adults claiming incapacity benefits and a higher proportion of residents who have a degree than the South East average. Larger numbers of people commute into than out of the Borough. The Borough

has a very mixed business sector with large numbers of small and medium size businesses with particular strengths in professional services (law and accountancy) and construction. There is a growing media industry led by Maidstone Studios and the Kent Messenger Group. Maidstone has an extensive further education campus (Mid Kent College) and a growing higher education offer. Residents living in the Borough have relatively high wages (although many higher earners commute out of the Borough to achieve these).

Maidstone came out as the top destination for business in the 2010 study of locations for business in Kent.

Transport links are generally good although rail travel could still be improved. Rail journey times to London from some of the smaller market towns (Headcorn, Staplehurst and Marden) are as low as 40 minutes but have recently increased to over an hour from Maidstone itself. The Borough is well served by the motorway network with the M20 and M2 both providing links to the M25 and the Channel Ports. The international high speed railway stations at Ebbsfleet (15 mins) and Ashford (25 mins) are also extremely accessible. The Council is pleased that an extension to the Thameslink network is being proposed to provide a direct link to London from Maidstone. With regard to travelling in and around the borough by car, congestion is an issue particularly in the town centre. The Council is looking to combat this issue through its transport strategy and work with partners. The bus transport network serving Maidstone town is relatively strong whilst rural transport presents distinct challenges.

Maidstone is an exceptionally green Borough with a number of parks, the largest of which is Mote Park, which is Grade II on the English Heritage Register of Historic Parks, and home to thriving rugby and cricket clubs. There are numerous smaller parks and squares within the town and villages which have benefited from a major playground and sports facility investment programme in recent years.

Maidstone's Local Strategic Partnership carried out work in 2010 looking at how public money is spent locally. They identified that £602 million was been spent in Maidstone in 2010 by various bodies including Kent County Council, Maidstone Borough Council, the Police and the local Primary Care Trust. Just over 35% of the money was spent on health and social well-being, nearly 17% spent on education and 15% on housing.

Our customers and what matters to them

In 2012 the Council carried out an extensive review on customer focussed services. Before we decided how services should be delivered in the future, we wanted to understand our customers better in terms of how they prefer to access services, including our services, and why this is.

We analysed the resident population of the borough using a customer segmentation tool called Mosaic Public Sector, which classifies households into groups so that the households in a group are as similar as possible to each

other, and as different as possible to any other group. The groups describe the households in each group in terms of their typical demographics, their behaviours, their lifestyle characteristics and their attitudes. We found that Maidstone had higher percentages than most other Kent boroughs of those groups who were more likely to find out information and transact online: 55% of the households in the borough are classified in these groups.

We also used Mosaic Public Sector to analyse those households who had contacted the Council in the last two and a half years. We found that households in some of the less affluent groups were much more likely to have contacted us than those in more affluent groups. Those living in the most affluent households were less likely to have contacted us by visiting the Gateway than less affluent households, but more likely to have transacted with us online. There were also significant differences when looking at contacts to specific services. For example, around 60% of those applying for Building Control services and parking permits came from groups who generally like to transact online, compared to 41% of those visiting us for homelessness advice.

We carried out focus groups and surveys with local residents and businesses. Some key findings were:

- Residents highlighted frustrations around red tape and lack of communication between departments when dealing with the Council
- Resident respondents like to use different ways of interacting with organisations for doing different things e.g.
 - 67% use the internet for finding out information and 62% for setting up and managing accounts – for speed, convenience, for a communications trail
 - 85% would use either face to face (42%) or telephone (43%) to deal with a problem – for reassurance, instant action, human interaction
 - 45% would use the telephone when making a complaint – for reassurance, instant action, to feel listened to
- Five out of six residents surveyed (85%) access the internet, with most (71%) accessing it daily. Families with children under 18 are significantly more likely to do things on line than those without children under 18
- Four out of ten respondents own a smart phone and 93% of those with a smart phone access the internet daily
- Both residents and businesses tend to use the telephone more than other channels
- More residents and businesses would prefer to interact with the Council by email in the future than the current numbers

- Fewer residents and businesses would prefer to interact with the Council by telephone in the future than currently do
- One in four residents and one in six businesses value face to face transactions with the Council and residents report receiving a good service in the Gateway
- Urban residents are significantly more likely than rural residents to interact with the Council face to face
- Residents and businesses criticised the Council's current website as hard to use and not focused enough on transactions

Echoing the national picture, we found that regular internet usage decreased with age, although 44% of respondents aged 65 or over said they used the Internet every day. The results also showed that those who have a disability are less likely to go online than those who said they were not disabled, but even so 55% of people with disabilities said they go online every day.

3. The corporate priorities

The Council is committed to and shares the vision for Maidstone, identified in the Sustainable Community Strategy 2009-2020:

"We want Maidstone Borough to be a vibrant, prosperous 21st century urban and rural community at the heart of Kent, where its distinctive character is enhanced to create a safe, healthy, excellent environment with high quality education and employment where all people can realise their aspirations."

The Council has identified the following three priorities and seven outcomes for Maidstone until 2015.

Priorities

1. For Maidstone to have a growing economy

In essence, Maidstone will be a good place to work and do business. The economy will continue to grow with a wide range of employment and business opportunities.

Outcomes by 2015

- A transport network that supports the local economy, with a focus on the delivery of an integrated transport strategy in conjunction with Kent County Council.
- A growing economy with rising employment, catering for a range of skill sets to meet the demands of the local economy

2. For Maidstone to be a decent place to live

Maidstone already has a clean, attractive and well designed and built environment. We wish to maintain this and ensure proper respect is paid

to its diverse and valuable assets so that Maidstone is a place where people want to live. We will continue to support our most vulnerable residents and seek to reduce the different forms of deprivation across the Borough in both urban and rural areas.

Outcomes by 2015

- Decent, affordable housing in the right places across a range of tenures.
- Continues to be a clean and attractive environment for people who live in and visit the Borough.
- Residents are not disadvantaged because of where they live or who they are, vulnerable people are assisted and the level of deprivation is reduced

3. Corporate and Customer Excellence

The Council will have a productive workforce with people in the right place at the right time, delivering cost effective services. Services will be affordable, delivered on time and to agreed standards in an accessible way.

Outcomes by 2015

- Customer focused services that residents are satisfied with
- Effective, cost efficient services are delivered across the borough

The Customer Service Improvement Strategy is a corporate strategy and is particularly clearly aligned with the organisational priority of 'Corporate and Customer Excellence', but also with the outcomes of assisting vulnerable people and for Maidstone to have a growing economy.

4. Where are we now?

Cost of service

In 2011/12, it cost us around £1.7m to manage customer contacts through the Contact Centre, Gateway, website and Post Room. It costs the Council around £7.86 for a face to face transaction in our Gateway, £2.35 if someone telephones our Contact Centre, £0.21 for a website visit, £0.67 to process an incoming letter and £0.46 to process a letter we send out. It should be noted that postage costs do not include scanning or indexing the post, the cost of the paper nor the officer time to write an outgoing letter or respond to an incoming letter.

Shifting contacts to less expensive communication channels

Since we published our Channel Shift Strategy in 2011 we have made progress in terms of making our service more efficient by shifting transactions online, but

not the level of progress we had hoped for. Therefore, this strategy supersedes the Channel Shift Strategy and takes a more robust approach to moving contacts to cheaper channels.

More people are using our website and we have also seen a decrease in the number of calls being dealt with by an operative in our Contact Centre. This is mainly because we have increased the types of payments that can be dealt with on an automated payments line. However, we have continued to see a rise in the numbers of people transacting with us face to face through our Gateway.

	2010/11		2011/12		April – December 2012/13	
	Number	%age	Number	%age	Number	%age
Web	673213	72%	677817	73%	xxx	74%
Face to Face	69870	7%	79080	8%	xxx	8%
Telephone	193965	21%	174450	19%	xxx	17%

Use of our online forms has grown by 100% since 2011, with 4817 self service forms being completed in 2012/2013 as at December 2012. We have a large number of contacts about Waste & Recycling and Environmental Services, and most transactions can now be completed on our website. Most recently, we have launched an online form which allows people to book and pay for a bulky refuse collection. However, little progress has been made in some of the other services that have high numbers of contacts, like Revenues (Council Tax and Business Rates), Benefits, Housing, Planning and Parking.

Our new, more customer focussed website is being tested by local people at the moment and will launch in 2013/14. Feedback from residents on the new website so far has generally been very positive.

Information management

Customers rightly have increasing expectations in terms of the speed and quality of service they receive but in the current climate resources are increasingly limited. Ensuring good information management can assist the organisation in delivering savings, efficiencies and meet the customers expectations, by changing the way services are delivered, changing the way information is received, held and delivered and introducing changes to technology. The Council needs to ensure that it is getting good value out of the information it holds so that it can be as effective as possible in service delivery to our customers.

Maidstone has information management measures in place, there is an overarching security policy for the organisation and individual retention policies within services. Information Liaison officers are available on each floor to

provide FOI and Data Protection advice to services when required and Data Quality is monitored within the Performance team.

The council recognises however that there are areas for improvement and that in order to fully identify these areas, appropriate solutions and to develop a vision and strategy for information management, specialist external support is required.

High speed broadband access

In 2012, 65% of the borough had access to broadband of 2mbps or more. This needs to be improved. The 'Make Kent Quicker' campaign saw thousands of people sign up and say they wanted more from their broadband, and helped to secure £9.87m of central government funding. In March 2013 Kent County Council signed a contract with BT to improve high speed broadband access across the county. Now, the combination of public funding and private investment, alongside existing roll-out plans, will make sure that at least 95% of properties in Kent will have access to higher-speed fibre broadband by the end of 2015 (with 91% having access to superfast speeds of 24mbps and above) – and every property in the project area able to access download speeds of at least 2mbps. This will aid not only our residents, but also bring benefits to businesses, making more areas of the borough more desirable to businesses looking to set up in or move into the borough.

5. Where do we want to be?

Vision, priorities and objectives

Our long term vision is:

Customers can access high quality public services with confidence, at any time, wherever they are

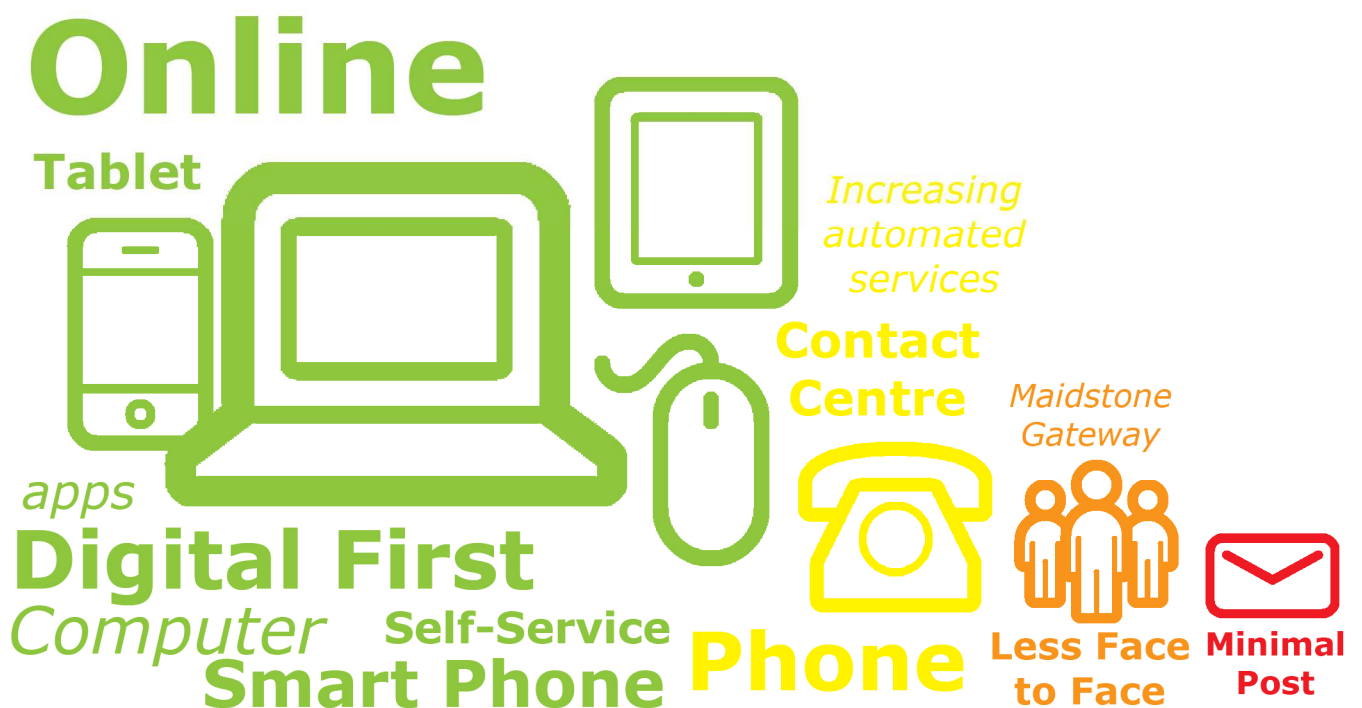
Maidstone Borough Council aims to deliver high quality, efficient, customer focussed services that are accessible to all, at the best possible cost.

By 2016 we will have introduced our new model of delivering customer services. We plan to reduce the numbers of people who need to visit us for face to face transactions in our Gateway, items of post we send and receive and the numbers of people who telephone us. Wherever possible we will seek to move transactions online, and where this is not possible because of the type of transaction or the needs of the person contacting us, to the telephone. However, we recognise that some transactions will still need to be carried out face to face, but we will seek to limit this type of contact to only our most vulnerable customers and most urgent or complex transactions.

We understand that some people currently find it more difficult to access our services than others, and we realise this will continue to be the case as we change the way in which we deliver services. Improving our website so more transactions can be carried out online at any time will help this, as will reducing the requirement for people to travel to visit our Gateway to see us. However, we realise that not only are some transactions more suited to face to face service delivery, but also that our preferred service channel of the internet is not easily accessible to everyone currently because of, for example, adverse financial circumstances and lack of skills or access to the Internet. Therefore, we will:

- Seek opportunities for partners located in local communities to carry out face to face transactions on our behalf
- Work with existing groups and partner organisations to increase the digital skills of our customers
- Work with other organisations in the private and public sectors to increase the availability of high speed broadband
- Explore with partners whether additional public internet and telephone access points are required and where these could be located
- Explore increasing the number of computers for public use in our buildings and how we can assist those who may need support in using our online services

Our new customer service delivery model will look like this:



We have 4 priorities in working towards achieving this new way of delivering customer services:

1. Efficient, accessible and customer focussed services
2. Secure and well managed information
3. Enabling people to do more for themselves
4. Affordable and sustainable customer service delivery

Efficient, accessible and customer focussed services

We want to ensure that we are delivering services that our customers want, in the ways that are accessible to them and that are as efficient as possible. Our objectives for achieving this are that by 2016:

- Our website will be our main service channel and we will have shifted at least 50,000 contacts from face to face and telephone channels to online
- We will have reviewed all our customer facing services, taking into account what our customers tell us is important to them, and made efficiencies in the way we deliver services equivalent to at least 23,400 hours of officer time (or the equivalent of 18 Full Time staff)¹
- Our services will be more easily accessible and we will respond to the needs and preferences of our most vulnerable customers

Secure and well managed information

As a local authority we collect and hold a lot of information, including information on our customers. We need to ensure this is securely stored and used appropriately, according to legislation and regulatory guidelines. Our objectives for achieving this are:

- By 2016 we will have refreshed our standards and procedures for the collection, use, and secure storage of information we hold, including customer data, to ensure the information management arrangements we have are appropriate and robust By 2014, we will have identified whether it is value for money to introduce a single account for every customer. We will have implemented any solution to achieve this that we decide upon by 2016

¹ 18 full time staff assuming 1 full time staff member is productive for 1,300 hours

Enabling people to do more for themselves

The residents and businesses in the borough are increasingly doing more online. Not being able to self serve online leaves people digitally excluded, meaning they cannot access goods and services whenever they want, and opportunities like money saving deals or discounts only available online are not available to them. As we ask our customers to do more online, we need to ensure that they have the skills and confidence to be able to do this. We also need to ensure that residents and businesses can access high speed broadband to be able to do things online. Our objectives for achieving this are that by 2016:

- We will have supported our partners, particularly Kent County Council, in ensuring that as many people in the borough as possible have access to super fast broadband so local residents and businesses are able to access the Internet, including our website, and transact online
- We will have worked with private, public and third sector partners to increase the level of digital skills in the borough and get more people transacting online

Affordable and sustainable customer service delivery

We want to provide excellent customer services now and into the future, but we must provide customer services differently as we need to make savings so that we can continue to provide our most important services and the priorities in the Strategic Plan. Our objectives for achieving this are that by 2016:

- We will have reduced the numbers of items of post we send out and receive by at least 30%, saving us approximately £50,000 per year in postage costs
- We will have re-designed our face to face customer service arrangements, making the optimum use of our accommodation to ensure value for money
- Staff numbers will be reduced where appropriate to make cashable savings

6. How are we going to get there?

Projects and actions

We have planned a large programme of work over the next three years to implement the Customer Service Improvement Strategy. This will be led by the Business Improvement team, but will involve substantial work for both Customer Services as well as those service areas making their services more efficient and customer focussed. As a programme is made up of many projects and pieces of

work, the projects included, the timescales planned for specific projects and the order of the projects will change as required. The following reflects the work by years as currently planned.

Year 1 (2013/14)

- Stop Gateway late night Thursday opening
- Introduce Planning appointments in the Gateway to free up the Planning Duty Officer
- Complete automated switchboard
- Change Contact Centre hours to 9-5 to help handle increasing email traffic
- Review the KCC out of hours contract (possibly including review of Contact Centre opening hours)
- Complete move to parking permits online
- Set up digital inclusion projects with partners
- Progress options with partners for our front facing operation
- Continue to improve the website including making it more usable for mobile devices
- Continue to move telephone payments to the automated line
- Refresh our email policy and procedure
- Review our policy on taking and potentially charging for credit card payments
- Review our policy on and procedures for taking cheques
- Start and complete efficiency reviews with Housing, Bereavement Services and Waste and Recycling and Environmental Services
- Start efficiency review with Planning
- Explore phased reminders for payments
- Information management project – using external expertise to help us understand the 'as is' position, set a vision and strategy for how we manage information and develop a way forward
- Decide whether to introduce a single customer account
- Reduce incoming and outgoing post

Year 2 (2014/15)

- Review and report predicted and delivered efficiencies/savings and agree projects to be included for the year

- Review Gateway Monday – Friday opening hours and Saturday opening
- Complete efficiency review with Planning
- Start and complete efficiency reviews with Revenues & Benefits, Museum, Environmental Health, Environmental Enforcement
- Start efficiency reviews in Finance and Parks & Leisure
- Explore introducing web chat
- Review success of pilot environmental service app and decide what our corporate approach to apps should be
- Review Contact Centre opening hours (if not completed in year1)
- Consider moving to appointments in the Gateway
- Review number and usages of Gateway self-serve kiosks
- Review need for Customer Relation Management software system

Year 3 (2015/16)

- Review and report predicted and delivered efficiencies/savings and agree projects to be included for the year
- Complete efficiency reviews in Finance and Parks & Leisure
- Start and complete efficiency reviews in Property, Procurement & Facilities Management, Community Development, VEBU, Democratic Services and Economic Development
- Consider the delivery options for the Contact Centre, including outsourcing.

Measuring progress

We will monitor the success of the Customer Service Improvement Strategy through the following performance measures:

1. Percentage of respondents satisfied with the way the Council runs its services (biennial Residents survey)
2. Percentage of contacts made through the internet, telephone and face to face
3. Efficiencies in time (FTE): a) identified; and b) delivered
4. Cashable savings (£): a) identified; and b) delivered
5. Customer satisfaction with telephone, face to face and internet contact

6. Percentage of contacts into the Council that are avoidable
7. Number of items of a) incoming; and b) outgoing post
8. Percentage of borough covered by broadband
9. Percentage of residents who go online at least weekly (biennial Residents Survey)

Reporting progress

The programme of work will be led and monitored by a Programme Board. Performance on expected benefits and progress will be measured every six months and reported to the Programme Board, made up of the Corporate Leadership Team, the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, the heads of service responsible for delivering benefits in their service areas and the Head of Business Improvement (Programme Manager).

The Customer Service Improvement Strategy will be refreshed annually and progress in planned work and in achieving benefits will be reported to Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet at that time.