

REPORT TO: Executive Board
DATE: 8 April 2010
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director - Resources
SUBJECT: Corporate Customer Service Standards

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 To consider the attached Corporate Customer Service Standards for the Authority.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION That Executive Board:

- i) Approve the draft Corporate Customer Service Standards and Guidance Notes for staff**
- ii) Continue to support the process to develop, promote and monitor the Standards, as part of gaining accreditation of the Cabinet Office Customer Service Excellence Standard as outlined in the report below;**

3.0 BACKGROUND

3.1 In February 2008 the Cabinet Office launched its approach to improving standards within Customer Services with the introduction of the Customer Service Excellence Standards to replace the Charter Mark. At this time the authority was undertaking a scrutiny review of Corporate Customer Complaints. At its meeting on 3rd June 2008 the Corporate Services Policy and Performance Board recommended that the Complaints review be followed up by a scrutiny review of Customer Services taking on board the new Customer Service Excellence Standards.

3.2 The two strands to this Scrutiny topic were:

- to explore how best to implement the new Customer Excellence Standard, produced by Cabinet Office in February 2008, in order to help drive improvement and consistency in customer service across the organisation
- to develop an overarching Customer Care Strategy which sets out the key areas the Council needs to focus on in order to secure improved outcomes for its customers.

3.2 The Customer Service Strategy was completed, supported and passed on by the Corporate Services PPB to the Executive Board for its meeting of 15th January 2009, where it was also approved.

- 3.3 The first actions from the Customer Services Strategy Action Plan involved the procurement of a company to work with the Council in the pursuit of the Customer Services Excellence Standard. In April 2009 a company called Customer Services Excellence Assessment Services (CSEAS) was appointed.
- 3.4 Following consultation with the assessment company a building block approach to accreditation has been agreed. That is, the Council is taking a step by step approach to accreditation that builds information and involvement from one stage to the next.
- 3.5 The first step is the collection of corporate evidence in relation to the 5 criteria in the Standard. The 5 criteria are: Customer Insight, the Culture of the Organisation, Information and Access, Delivery, and Timeliness and Quality of Service. Within these 5 criteria there are a total of 57 elements, against which the Council must gather evidence to meet with the requirements of these elements. There will be a pre-assessment of the corporate elements in May 2010 and a full assessment in July 2010. The Council will not receive accreditation from the corporate assessment but a template will be compiled, which other services can then use in their bid for accreditation, along with their own examples of how they meet the 5 criteria. Having the corporate template reduces the workload for service areas as they already have some evidence to support their claim for accreditation and their evidence is the second part of the building blocks. The next stage will be to focus on HDL and Revenues and Benefits. Once these have been accredited the Council will learn from their experience and use this to help prioritise other services for accreditation and then roll out a full programme of accreditation.
- 3.5 Provided that the Corporate element is achieved in July 2010, it is hoped that the accreditation of HDL and Revenues and Benefits will follow quickly and a roll-out programme designed by the end of the year with key services going for accreditation over the following 24 month period.
- 3.6 Alongside this, it has been necessary to ensure that all staff, officers, Members, partners and the public, have some degree of understanding about what the Council is trying to achieve through Customer Service Excellence. To do this, a set of Corporate Customer Services Standards have been developed, as attached to this report. These will be promoted in a variety of ways. In particular, staff will receive training in relation to the new Corporate Customer Service Standards.

4.0 PROGRESS TO DATE

- 4.1 As noted above the Customer Services Strategy was supported by Corporate Services PPB and approved by Executive Board in January 2009. Following this a company was appointed to help work towards accreditation and to undertake the assessment process. So far work

has begun on collecting corporate information but in particular a set of Corporate Customer Service Standards have now been developed to ensure we focus our Customer Service efforts in the right direction. Information about the Standards was gathered from services within the Council. Desk based research was also carried out, which involved gathering information about Corporate Customer Service Standards from other authorities.

- 4.2 Some services will have more specific or advanced service standards in which case, the Corporate Standards will form the minimum Standards that a service must adhere to, especially where none currently exist.
- 4.3 The Communications Team have begun to develop promotional materials for a media release to staff, partners and the public in April (2010), provided the Standards are approved
- 4.4 In addition, a staff guide has been prepared, and further work is being undertaken with the corporate training section to incorporate the Standards into the in-house Customer Training courses. Particular consideration is being given to training that will enable staff to deal with practical front-line issues and to ensure staff and Members are able to contribute to the continuing development of Customer Service Standards. Some training of this nature is already provided but will be extended to ensure a wider coverage of staff.
- 4.5 An approach for monitoring the Standards across the Council is also being developed, which will give more precise consideration to the timing of e-mail and written responses and over time consideration will also be given to developing a wider range of methods for communicating, such as text messaging.
- 4.6 The full programme of promotional activities will include: cascade briefings, 'roadshows', focus groups, use of the 'In Touch' magazine and establishing customer care 'champions' in each service. The purpose is to give people a common 'vision' of what a customer-focused organisation looks like and what is expected from them.
- 4.7 The Corporate Services PPB recently gave consideration to the Standards in their meeting of 23rd February 2010 and continues to endorse this progress in pursuit of the Customer Service Excellence Standard and all comments made by them have been incorporated into the Standards, Strategy and Action Plan.
- 4.8 The Council already have a good level of customer services but the Corporate Standards will help to build on the current position and it is proposed that these Standards be approved by the Executive Board and to progress with the development of related training, communication and monitoring aspects and the pursuit of accreditation of the Cabinet Office Customer Service Excellence Standard.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There will be a cost for undertaking the promotion of the Standards but this will be contained within existing budgets.

6.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Failure to progress this agenda will impact upon our CAA assessment but more importantly the standards of service we provide our customers.

7.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

The corporate customer service strategy will impact on all council directorates and priorities and its development should assist in more effective services and outcomes for customers.

8.0 RISK ANALYSIS

Failure to adopt the standards may disadvantage the Council's approach to customer services and outcomes.

9.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

The strategy and achievement of the Standard will ensure equal and fair access to customer services by all customers and potential customers

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
Notes of Topic Group Meetings	2 nd Floor Municipal Building Kingsway Widnes	Rob MacKenzie
Notes of Officer Group meetings and final draft Customer Services Strategy, Action Plan and Corporate Customer Service Standards.	6 th Floor Municipal Building Kingsway Widnes	Dwayne Johnson
Minutes of Executive Board meeting of 15 th January 2009	Committee Services 3 rd Floor Municipal Building, Kingsway Widnes	Angela Scott

Halton Borough Council
Customer Service Standards

Halton Borough Council's Customer Service Standards, set out in this document, tell you how we will work with you to give you a service that meets your expectations. These expectations will be met in any contact you have with the Council and all of its employees.

Our Halton Direct Link One Stop Shops and Contact Centre give you easy access to all Council services. Specially trained advisors are available to support your enquiries and will be able to deal with most issues from beginning to end.

Access to our services

We make our services easily accessible. You can contact us in the following ways:

In person at our One Stop Shops:

Halton Lea - Concourse Level, Rutland House, Halton Lea, Runcorn, WA7 2ES

Widnes - Brook Street, Widnes, WA8 6NB

Runcorn - Church Street, Runcorn, WA7 1LX

Ditton - Queens Avenue, Ditton, Widnes, WA8 8HR

Opening times

Monday to Friday 09.00am to 5.30pm

Saturday opening time are currently being revised (to follow)

On the Telephone:

You can call us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by ringing: **0303 333 4300**
Minicom Service is available on **0151 907 8346**

By visiting our website

www.halton.gov.uk

By e-mail

hdl@halton.gov.uk

Customer Charter

In our interactions with you we will:

- Be polite and professional at all times
- Treat you fairly and not discriminate against you
- Try to resolve your query at the first point of contact where possible
- Explain clearly what we have done and will do next
- Explain clearly what needs to be done, by whom and to what timescales
- Ensure you leave knowing which department is dealing with your enquiry and at what stage your enquiry is at if not completed
- Protect information you give us ensuring all personal data is dealt with in accordance with legislation
- Aspire to meet and better your expectations
- Welcome customer feedback to assist us in improving our service

In return our employees have a right to:

- work in a safe environment free from aggressive or threatening behaviour
- be treated politely.

Help us to help you by letting us know:

- in good time if you need to cancel or rearrange an appointment
- if you need an interpreter or language signer
- immediately if you are unhappy with the service you have received
- if you are pleased with the service you have received.

If you call at one of our offices we will:

- Provide a welcoming, clean, safe environment which is easily accessible
- Ensure you are greeted by a member of staff who is wearing a name badge so you know who you are speaking to
- Aim to see you within 10 minutes of arrival at any Council Building or within 10 minutes of your appointment time
- Listen to you and react to your needs appropriately
- Provide easy to understand information and make suitable arrangements for those customers who need hearing, visual or interpretation assistance or other support needs
- Make sure that any information provided is accurate, useful and beneficial and is provided in an appropriate format

If you telephone us we will:

- Aim to answer your call in an average of 30 seconds
- Ensure a member of staff answers your call in a friendly and professional manner, clearly stating their name and department so you know who you are talking to
- Make sure that if we have to transfer your call, we will tell you why and who you will be transferred to
- Provide easy to understand information and make arrangements for those customers who need hearing or interpretation assistance, or other support

If you email or write to us we will:

- Provide a full response within 10 working days
- Ensure all letters of response have a return address, contact name and telephone number
- Record the details of your enquiry and process your request for service if required
- Ensure that if we cannot answer your query directly, it is re-directed correctly and request a prompt reply on your behalf
- Respond in clear, concise and easy to understand language ensuring all information is accurate, relevant and suitable for your needs

Our complaints and compliments procedure

We want you to be happy about the service you receive from us. We welcome any comments, compliments and complaints about the services to enable us to maintain the standards set out above.

If you wish to make a complaint or compliment about any service you can:

- Visit www.halton.gov.uk and complete the contact us form.
- Ring the Contact Centre which is open 24 hours a day on 0303 333 4300 and speak to one of our Customer Service Advisors who will deal with your enquiry
- E-mail hdl@halton.gov.uk
- Visit your nearest Halton Direct Link One Stop Shop and one of our Customer Service Advisors who will deal with your enquiry.
- Write to The Policy and Performance Department at

Halton Borough Council
Municipal Building
Kingsway
Widnes
Cheshire
WA8 7QF

Alternatively, you may wish to feedback through your local Councillor who will submit comments on your behalf

Staff Guide to Helping
Halton Borough Council achieve the Customer Service Standards

Halton Borough Council has set Customer Service Standards which define how we will work with our customers to give them a service that meets their expectations. These Customer Service Standards are available in leaflet format and on the website at [*web address to be added*](#)

Every officer of the council has a role to play in helping the council achieve these standards, not just front line staff, and it is important to recognise this. This Guide aims to explain what our service Standards are and how you can help us achieve them.

In all your interactions with a Customer you must ensure that:-

- You are polite and professional at all times
- You treat them fairly and not discriminate against them in anyway
- If you can not help the customer find someone who can without passing the customer from department to department
- Explain clearly what you have done for them and what you will be doing for them
- Explain clearly what need to be done, who's responsibility this is, and the timescales to be met so that they can expect to get an outcome or a response

- Ensure that the customer knows which department is dealing with their enquiry and at what stage their enquiry is at if not completed
- Protect information they give us ensuring all personal data is dealt with in accordance with legislation e.g. data protection regulations
- Aspire to meet and better the customer's expectations
- You encourage Customers to provide feedback on the service they have received to allow us to improve our services.

Face to Face Communication

Introduction

Customers can often feel nervous about visiting, or being visited by, a large organisation such as the Council. It is your role as a representative of the Council to ensure that they are put at ease and receive the service they require.

Standards

- Provide a welcoming, clean, safe environment which is easily accessible
- Ensure the Customer is greeted by a member of staff who is wearing a name badge so they know who they are speaking to
- Aim to see the Customer within 10 minutes of arrival at any Council Building or within 10 minutes of their appointment time
- Listen to the Customer and react to their needs appropriately
- Provide easy to understand information and make suitable arrangements for those customers who need special arrangements – e.g. hearing, visual or interpretation assistance
- Make sure that any information provided is accurate, useful and beneficial and is provided in an appropriate format

How to achieve the standards

- Always ensure that when you are dealing with Customers that you have your ID Badge clearly on display
- Greet visitors proactively with “Good morning” or “Good afternoon” as appropriate. Don't wait for them to approach you
- Don't forget your manners - Invite the customer to sit down, don't assume they don't have standards
- When visiting customers at their home, introduce yourself and the purpose for your visit. Always show your ID card
- Address the customer professionally, using their name. Do not use familiarities such as “love” or “mate” this can be offensive to some people
- Maintain good eye contact and use positive body language to show the customer that you are listening
- Be aware of the customer's body language to assess their reaction to what you are saying

- Ask open questions (how, what, when, where, etc.) to establish what the customer requires
- Re-cap by summarising the enquiry in your own words
- Always tell the customer what you are doing and what will happen next
- Avoid passing on any enquiry that you could deal with yourself
- Ensure that another officer has access to your diary so if you are unable to come into work, contact can be made with any customers that you have appointments with
- Arrive on time for appointments, but where this is not possible ensure you make contact with the customer to let them know you will be late and why
- If there is paper work to be completed, offer the customer support in doing this or refer them to their nearest Halton Direct Link One Stop Shop who will be able to assist them
- Ensure you are aware of the Council's translation and Interpretation service and can access it when needed

Telephone Communication

Introduction

Most customer contact with the Council is by telephone so it is important that you are professional and effective when responding to phone enquiries.

Standards

- Aim to answer all calls in an average of 30 seconds
- Ensure a member of staff answers the Customers call in a friendly and professional manner, clearly stating their name and department so they know who you are talking to
- Make sure that if we have to transfer your call, we will tell you why and who you will be transferred to
- Provide easy to understand information and make arrangements for those customers who have support needs, such as hearing or interpretation assistance

How to achieve the standards

- Always ensure office cover is maintained between the core office hours of 9.00 to 17.30 Monday to Thursday and 9.00 to 16:40 on a Friday
- Ensure that you answer all calls as soon as possible. Don't ignore a ringing phone or assume someone else will answer it
- Speak clearly when answering the phone and state your name and service area
- Ensure you answer the phone with an appropriate pitch and tone to your voice. Effectively answering "with a smile on your face"

- If you are to be away from your phone (even briefly), divert calls to another officer who is available – advise them that you are doing this, and when you will be back
- If you hear a phone ringing pick it up, even if it is not yours
- Try to resolve the customer's enquiry even if it isn't your main service area. If you can't help offer to take a message and tell them who will be contacting them – don't ask them to call back later
- Have a pen and notepad by your phone so that you can note down key pieces of information during the call
- Summarise the details to ensure you have understood the resolution that the customer wants
- Keep the customer informed of what you are doing, for instance if you need to go away from the phone to obtain some information, or need to transfer the call to another officer
- When you need to go away from your phone to check some details, put the customer on hold so that they can not hear conversations in the office
- Offer to call the customer back if it will take some time to find the information needed to resolve their enquiry
- Ensure you are aware of the Council's Interpretation Service and can access it when required
- Do not eat or chew whilst on the phone
- Always thanks the customer for their call and check if there's anything else you can help with

E-mail Communication

Introduction

An increasing number of enquiries are now received via e-mail. Responses to these enquiries must be to the same standard as for any other written correspondence and adhere to the same timescales.

All contacts which are generated through the "Contact Us" form on the Council Website and e-mails to HDL are managed by Halton Direct Link. Where they have the information they will respond directly to the customer within the timescales given. If e-mail response requires information from the specialist departments the e-mail will be forwarded to the appropriate service for them to respond to the Customer. HDL will contact the Customer and inform them which department is dealing with the enquiry and that they should expect a full response within 10 working days.

Standards

- Provide a full response within 10 working days
- Record the details of the enquiry and process the request for service if required
- Ensure that if we cannot answer your query directly, it is re-directed correctly and request a prompt reply on your behalf
- Respond in clear, concise and easy to understand language ensuring all information is accurate and relevant and suitable to the Customers needs

How to achieve the standards

- You must respond to any e-mails from customers within 10 working days
- If you can't respond within 10 working days, send a 'holding' letter to the customer explaining why and when you expect to be able to respond fully
- Each department is responsible for monitoring their own response times
- If you receive an e-mail which has been forwarded to you by HDL to respond you must ensure you send the Customer a full response within 10 working days of the initial e-mail. Please copy HDL into the response so that they can attach the response to the customer's record within the CRM system
- Begin your e-mail messages with an appropriate salutation
- Set a signature into your outgoing messages which contains your name, job title, location and phone number
- All outgoing e-mails to members of the public need to have a link to The Council's survey on e-mail responses so that the customer can comment on our service and response time - [Link is xxxxxxxxxxxx](#)
- Do not write your e-mails in capitals – this is considered to be like shouting
- Use appropriate language – don't for example use colloquialisms or text shorthand
- Spell check your messages before sending them out. This can be set to run automatically
- If you receive an e-mail directly that you will not be handling, advise the customer of the details of the officer you have passed the enquiry to
- Use the 'out of office' facility when you will be unable to respond to e-mails
- Give access to your e-mail to another officer so that they can check messages if you are off sick. Check with your manager what the arrangements are in your service
- Arrange for an 'out of office' response to be implemented on behalf of any officers who are unexpectedly away from work for a prolonged period
- Do not use jargon or technical terms
- Ensure you are aware of the Council's translation service and can access it when needed

Written Communication

Introduction

Letters are sent out by all sections of the Council every day. It is important that

a standard corporate style is used, both in layout and accessibility of the language

used. For further information on the Council's Corporate Style please refer to the Corporate Communications Guide – copies of which are available from Communications and Marketing.

Customers must be able to understand any documentation we send to them and it is important we use 'Plain English', and that they receive it promptly and in their preferred format. Please be aware of Customers with visual impairment or other support needs.

Standards

- Provide a full response within 10 working days
- Ensure all letters of response have a return address, contact name and telephone number
- Record the details of the Customers enquiry and process your request for service if required
- Ensure that if we cannot answer the Customers query directly, it is re-directed correctly and request a prompt reply on their behalf
- Respond in clear, concise and easy to understand language ensuring all information is accurate and relevant and suitable for your needs

How to achieve the standards

- Respond to letters as soon as you can. Don't wait for the response deadline
- Use 'Plain English' guidelines when drafting correspondence – please see the Corporate Communications Guide
- Never use a typeface smaller than font size 12point. 14point is the minimum size recommended for readers with a visual impairment
- Use an accessible font – one without embellishments to the letters (sans serif)
- Avoid the use of jargon or technical terminology
- Only use an abbreviation after the full word has been written with the abbreviation in brackets
- Ensure you are aware of the Council's translation service and can access it when needed