

# Customer First Strategy

2014 to 2017



# DRAFT



*Altogether better*





## **Foreword**

### Welcome to Durham County Council's Customer First Strategy for 2014 to 2017

This refreshed strategy sets out how, over the next three years, we aim to transform the way in which our customers access our services.

Our vision for this strategy is clear; we aim to:

***“Deliver customer services that provide value for money, flexibility and choice whilst placing our customers at the heart of everything we do.”***

We have come a long way since the new unitary council of County Durham was formed in 2009. At that time, we were committed to providing a consistent and responsive approach to all our customers whilst we transformed and harmonised the way we worked across the service areas. Our commitment to providing strong customer service has not changed; however we are now working in an environment of increased demand for services; changes to the welfare system and reducing budgets.

The council will have experienced a 50% reduction in the amount of funding it receives directly from the government by 2016/17. This challenging economic climate continues to dominate decision making and the priorities of the council. Our aim is to make sure that these cuts are well managed and that the impact on our customers is minimised. We will continue to consult widely on our savings plans and changes to services to ensure the needs of local people are understood and customer feedback is used to help shape future priorities.

This strategy is aimed at all our customers, whether they be residents, visitors, businesses or partners. We want to ensure that we provide ways of contacting us which are convenient for our customers; that customers are able to easily report their requests, issues and concerns to us and that they are clear on when to expect that service to be delivered by us.

We need to balance diminishing resources with a commitment to providing essential services for vulnerable communities. This will require us to think differently about the way we provide services to develop and encourage self-service, and work better with our partners to save money and join up services.

This strategy document sets out our approach to these challenges over the next three years.

**Councillor Brian Stephens**

Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Local Partnerships



## Delivering an altogether better Durham

The Customer First Strategy is central to ensuring that customers remain at the heart of our vision for an altogether better place which is altogether better for people. Our strategy supports and contributes to all five overarching priorities which are:

**Altogether wealthier** - focusing on creating a vibrant economy and putting regeneration and economic development at the heart of all our plans

**Altogether better for children and young people** - ensuring children and young people are kept safe from harm and that they can 'believe, achieve and succeed'

**Altogether healthier** - improving health and wellbeing

**Altogether safer** - creating a safer and more cohesive county

**Altogether greener** - ensuring an attractive and 'liveable' local environment and contributing to tackling global environmental challenges



### Treating people fairly and respecting differences

We are committed to treating all our customers fairly, with respect and dignity, regardless of background or abilities. We will take account of individual needs and make appropriate adjustments to improve access to services. We take our responsibilities seriously and will train our staff, improve our buildings, provide accessible information and investigate all complaints fairly.



## Understanding our county and customers

As our county is diverse in both its geography and the make-up of our communities, we need to ensure that we build a strategy which takes account of those diverse needs and the ways in which we are able to interact with customers who need our services. We also want the county to flourish as a place so we need to ensure that our visitors and businesses can easily access information to encourage them to visit and to set up or expand a business with us.



## Changing technology and customer expectations

Each year we answer more than 910,000 telephone enquiries and deal with more than 270,000 face to face enquiries via our customer access points. The number of emails and web forms we receive are increasing significantly. The telephone remains the preferred method of contact.

The internet is changing the way that people interact both in terms of social contact and when requesting goods and services. Communities are developing around interest rather than just location. The rise of social networking presents the council with an enormous opportunity to engage with people in new and exciting ways.

We know that our customers' expectations regarding the way they can access our services are changing. There is demand for faster, easier contact at a time and place that is convenient to them. We need to meet this demand. We also need to ensure that we are providing access channels which give good value for money at a time when we are having to reduce resources to achieve efficiencies. This means improving our online provision to offer electronic self-service and better information services.

### Did you know?

Payments for services online have increased by 65% from 2011/12 to 2012/13.

### Did you know?

A recent survey shows 78% of our residents have access to the internet. Ipsos Mori Jan 2013.

### Did you know?

Over 12,000 people follow the council's social media accounts (Facebook and Twitter).

We want to make improvements to our internet services and provide higher quality and more convenient access to services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We must also recognise that there are still groups of people who do not have access to the internet so the council will ensure that the right support is available to those who will need it.

### Did you know?

76% of internet users in County Durham access/buy products and services online. This is higher than the national average.

The Digital Durham project is aiming to widen access to superfast broadband across the County, so we can enable residents to access our online services. This project will result in 98% of properties having access to superfast broadband by 2016.

# Case Study

## Moving school admissions online

School admissions moved from paper-based systems to web-based systems by encouraging parents to apply online. Historically, parents had two options when applying for a school place; online and via a paper-based application form inside the Parents' Guide to School Admissions publication.



The paper application form and the Parents' Guide to School Admissions publication was abolished and replaced with an information postcard signposting parents to apply online. This resulted in a significant increase in online applications between 2012 and 2013:

- online primary admissions increased from 36% ➔ 72%
- online junior admissions increased from 31% ➔ 70%
- online secondary admissions increased from 25% ➔ 77%

These changes allowed us to make savings, improve customer service and streamline our systems.

## Customer First

We want to ensure that customers can access our services in a variety of ways; that our service delivery is effective, fair and efficient and that our staff are helpful, knowledgeable and friendly. Our vision for this is captured below, we want to:

***“deliver customer services that provide value for money, flexibility and choice whilst placing our customers at the heart of everything we do.”***

### Key Outcomes

We have established three outcomes that we will work to deliver to embody the 'Customer First' ethos and ensure we are providing cost effective services. These are:

**A range of effective and easy to use ways in which our customers can deal with us**

**Responsive and customer focussed services**

**Customer feedback informs learning and results in improved services**

The rest of this strategy outlines how we will help deliver these outcomes.

# A range of effective and easy to use ways in which our customers can deal with us

## What this means

We recognise that our customers want to contact us in different ways depending on the nature of the interaction. We need to develop our website to provide better access to council services online. The rise of social networking presents the council with an enormous opportunity to engage with people in new and exciting ways. The telephone remains the most popular means of customer contact and we will continue to develop our technology in this area. We currently have 14 contact centres across the council dealing with a range of services; we will review this to consider joining up services where appropriate and work towards making it simpler for the customer and more efficient to operate.

We want to ensure that where our communities need to see us in person, that they are able to do so. However, providing face to face services is the most expensive means of interacting with our customers and as we are in a climate of reducing resources, we will need to carry out a review of our customer access points to consider where they should be located in the future, based on customer need and providing value for money. We will also ensure that our customers are aware that they can access service information in any of our buildings, and we will continue to explore opportunities to deliver face to face services outside of the traditional access points, working with other familiar service providers.

We need to be clear about what standards of service customers can expect to receive from our staff when contacting the council. We will monitor our performance in relation to timeliness and quality of service and use this to make improvements where we can.

### Did you know?

In 2012/13 there were 31 reports of abandoned shopping trolleys.

### Did you know?

In 2012/13 11,871 street lighting requests were logged.

### Did you know?

When it's wintry weather you can go online to see which roads are gritted where you live, work or travel.

## Our commitment:

- Consider "access for all" when making decisions about how people can contact us.
- Provide more and better self service facilities in our public buildings.
- Use social media to communicate messages quickly and widely.
- Refresh our service standards and the way we report our performance.
- Provide opportunities for our customers to access online services and continue to expand broadband in the county.
- Ensure we can deal with out of hours emergencies such as flooding incidents.
- Make it easier for customers to telephone us.
- Make better use of our buildings to widen access to information on services.

# Responsive and customer focussed services

## What this means

It is important that everyone who works in the council puts our customers at the forefront of the way we work and deliver services. To ensure that we are as responsive as possible, we will continuously look closely at the way we respond to customers enquiries. We will also eliminate processes which do not add value to customer enquiries, to make the service as efficient as possible

It is important that we are giving out the right information, advice and support and that our staff are courteous and polite. We will review our quality assurance systems and deliver a new programme of customer care training so our staff can deal confidently with customers.

We will look in-depth at a number of our key areas of service delivery to review the customer experience and improve the way we work. This will mean eliminating wasteful parts of the process, reviewing our letters, forms and information to ensure they are clear and easily understood and use customer feedback to improve the quality of our service provision.

## Did you know?

In 2012, approximately 40,000 people were helped to stay in their own homes through the provision of community based services such as home care, day care, equipment, adaptations and respite care arrangements.

## Did you know?

In 2012/13 customers submitted 16,468 requests regarding delivery of refuse and recycling containers.

## Our commitment:

- Take account of individual needs and make appropriate adjustments to help all customers access council services.
- Improve the way we deal with customers by implementing a new customer care training package.
- Ensure our communications are as clear as they can be including ensuring forms and letters are easy to read.
- Identify where ICT solutions can improve the way services are delivered.
- Consider changing our working arrangements to accommodate customer needs.



# Customer feedback informs learning and results in improved services

## Did you know?

Only 2% of the complaints received into the Council in 2012/13 were escalated to the Local Government Ombudsman.

We have made some major changes to the ways in which we provide services; including implementing alternate weekly collections for waste and recycling; and introducing charges for some services.

It is important that we capture the views of our service users so that we can learn from this feedback and use it to review the way in which we provide services. We are also committed to using the information we have on the reasons for people contacting us, so we can build that into service improvement. We also need to build our information systems so we can adapt services to meet the diverse needs of our communities.

## Did you know? If you follow us on Twitter and Facebook:

You can get regular updates when weather causes disruption to our services.

You can find out what we're doing to make County Durham altogether better #lovedurham.

## Our commitment:

- Take your views into account when improving services.
- Enable customers to access their information securely online.
- Use customer feedback to inform business planning.
- Monitor the equality impact of service changes and use that information for future service development.
- Review the way in which we deal with all customer feedback, including complaints, compliments and comments.
- Tell customers when their feedback has been used to shape service provision through 'you said, we did' information.