



North Hertfordshire District Council

Customer Care Strategy

2003 to 2006

Foreword

Customer Care is a theme that runs through everything we do, it is at the heart of what we do. A service cannot be seen or touched, only experienced; it is up to all employees of the Council to provide the personal touch that makes the customer comfortable.

The definition of a 'customer' according to the Concise Oxford dictionary can be:

- 1) 'a person who buys goods or services from a shop or business' or
- 2) 'a person one has to deal with'

North Herts District Council offers a range of services, some of which are paid for through Council tax and some that are paid for on demand. We also offer services that our customers do not always wish to receive, such as summons and environmental health inspections. It is essential that we never regard our customers as 'people we have to deal with'. We must define our customers as our community and our strategic priority is to put them first.

The definition of 'care' according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary can be:

- 1) 'a thing to be done or seen to'
- 2) 'to feel concern, interest or emotion'

At North Herts District Council we define our approach to Customer Care as 'putting people first'. To achieve this we must feel concern for, and interest in, our customers both internal and external. This strategy is designed to ensure that we will provide excellence in Customer Care, that we are all able to put people first, able to show interest and concern for our customers regardless of the Council service that they are using. This is linked closely with the Council's Comprehensive Equality Policy.

Day to day communication such as the image projected over the telephone or in letters and how we speak to our customers is critical to the way in which the Council is perceived and will affect the value placed on our services.

Over the next three years we aim to:

1. Establish simplified Customer Care standards that are reviewed regularly to ensure they reflect our Customers' needs. These will be a framework for all services but will recognise that services may need to set up their own Customer Commitments or Charters to promise to provide their services in a particular way or time period.
2. Provide the Council with framework of training and development to continue to build upon the skills our employees have, whilst providing them with access to the latest training, enabling them to deliver excellence in Customer Care in their jobs.
3. Continue to develop the way in which we evaluate what our customers think of the Customer Care we deliver.

This strategy will provide us with the infrastructure to maintain a high level of Customer Care that is responsive to the experiences that our customers have. By committing ourselves to this strategy we are demonstrating our commitment to provide our customers with the best and most cost effective Customer Care. We need to achieve this through all our employees, as a negative experience in one part of the Council will affect the reputation of all services.

It is also important to remember that a large number of our services are provided internally to other employees of the Council. It is essential that we remember that our Customer Care Standards and Strategy are focused on internal customers (our colleagues) as well as external customers (our citizens).

Customer Care Strategy - An Overview

The Customer Care strategy 2003-2006 will support the authority in achieving its strategic aims and improving the quality of life for everyone in North Hertfordshire. The strategic objectives for the authority for 2002/03 are:

- To provide high quality accessible services which put people first
- To provide value for money by running our services more efficiently
- To promote the economic, environmental and social well-being of the district

The main challenges that the Corporate Customer Services team will be able to directly address will be:

- Delivery of new, simplified Customer Care standards
- Support the delivery of the Customer Care standards through best practice in our own service areas of Web enquiries, Reception and Switchboard
- Development of an action plan to address the development of Customer Care for those with special needs with the Equalities Officer and Steering Group to meet the needs of the Council's Comprehensive Equality Policy.
- Development of a portfolio of Customer Care training for the Council
- Development of the Council's Customer Care appraisal competencies with the Organisational Development Team
- Developing the Council's Comments, Compliments and Complaints system to deliver more management information with the Customer Relations Officers and their deputies in each Directorate
- Development of customer focused consultation with the Best Value team
- Supporting the establishment of a Customer Relationship Management system through the Access to Services Strategy
- Co-ordination of the Council's Access Channel Team within the Access to Services Project to ensure Council wide involvement and adoption of new technology in addition to providing training to promote excellence in Customer Care

The strategy has been devised and prioritised using the following sources of information:

- The Council's Comprehensive Equality Policy
- The Council's Race Equality Scheme
- The Corporate Strategic Objectives for 2002/3, 2004/5
- Workshops on Customer Care Standards - May 2003
- Feedback from the Access Channel Team
- Feedback from Directorates through their DMT's
- Access to Services Draft Strategy - September 2002
- Access to Services Service Improvement Plan - 2003
- Access to Services Workshops
- Implementing Electronic Government Statement 2 - November 2002
- Best Value Review of Customer Care - Jan 2002
- Customer Care Standards
- Feedback from the Customer Service Team
- National Strategy for Local eGovernment 2002
- District Wide Surveys
- Citizen Panel Results

The strategy is directly linked with this information. The Council needs to have the right standards, training and development and customer feedback to allow us to focus on

providing excellent standards of Customer Care in an environment of continuous improvement.

Over the next three years we will be seeking to implement a simple, co-ordinated approach to Customer Care that achieves the following goals:

- Establishment of a clear service brand for the Council based upon delivering our Customer Care standards on a consistent basis in all services that our community can place trust in. Additional service commitments or targets may supplement these standards. The Customer Care standards, however, may not be altered within other services.
- Employees well trained in Customer Care, confident to deal with all our customers, and facing any challenge, in a professional and caring way
- An excellent service experience for all our customers, measured by a range of tools, on a continuous basis. This will allow us to recognise how and when we can do things better.

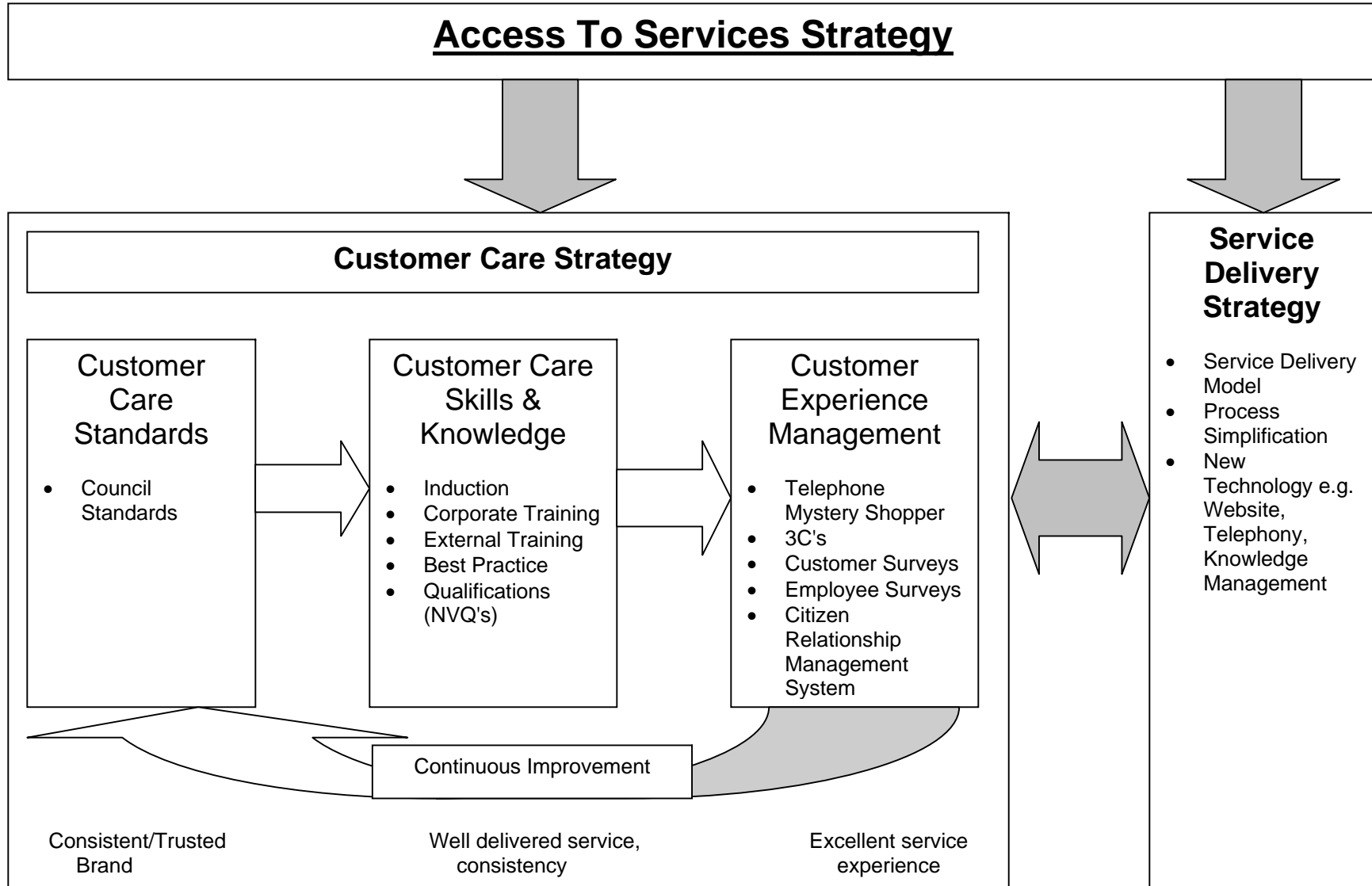
The Customer Care strategy is therefore separated into 3 elements:

- 1. Customer Care Standards**
- 2. Customer Care Skills & Knowledge**
- 3. Customer Experience Management**

The Corporate Customer Services team will manage the strategy but it will only be fully effective with the support of all effected by the policies and procedures developed to achieve the goals stated above. Timescales have been assigned to key work elements of the strategy but these will be flexible based on the changing needs of our customers both internal and external.

The chart on the following page illustrates the Customer Care Strategy and its relationship to the Access to Services Strategy - Access to Services being split in to Customer Care and Service Delivery.

North Herts District Council Customer Care Strategy



Customer Care Standards

To develop simplified Customer Care standards for the Council. These are the Council's values that will create satisfied customers, internally and externally. The standards are designed to establish a consistency in output whilst ensuring that we can be responsive to the individual needs and wants of the customer at the time. This is often reliant on the level of care shown by the employee. We therefore aim to standardise the skills and knowledge that sit behind the service delivery process. We will ensure that these standards are continually reviewed based on our customers' feedback so that Customer Care excellence is maintained through continuous improvement.

It is important to note that the Council's Customer Care Standards apply to all our services. However the Customer Care standards are also a framework that allow individual services to make additional commitments to their customers about the way in which they will deliver their service.

We are able to manage our customers' expectations by the standards we set for ourselves. By setting and meeting our Customer Care standards our customers are more likely to hold the values we want them to have in dealings with us, this applies to internal customers too:

- They pay on time
- They provide good and helpful feedback
- They make a commitment to us
- They can tolerate momentary hiccups
- They are interested in what we do

It is essential that the requirement to follow the Council's Customer Care Standards be placed on any contractor selected to provide a service on our behalf. This is established as a requirement of the Council's Contract Standing Orders and must form part of the evaluation criteria for appointing a contractor. Contractors must be required, under contract to meet the standards that we have established.

Area	Action Points	Target Completion Date
Review of Customer Care Standards	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Survey Customers 2. Staff Workshops 3. Review feedback against existing standards 4. Draft new standards 5. New Standards to Management Board for Approval 6. New Standards to Management Team 7. New Standards to Performance and Review Committee 8. New Standards to Cabinet 	SUMMER 2002 MAY/JUNE 2003 AUGUST 2003 AUGUST 2003 SEPTEMBER 2003 SEPTEMBER 2003 OCTOBER 2003 NOVEMBER 2003

Area	Action Points	Target Completion Date
Publication of New Customer Care Standards	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Poster Campaign 2. Production of 'Putting People First Leaflet'? 3. Include in future Street Plans/A-Z publications 4. Press release 5. Outlook 6. NHDC News 7. Team Brief Customer Care Edition 'Putting People First' 8. Promote to Partnerships 9. Promote to Contractors 10. Incorporation of new Customer Care Standards into Contract Standing Orders, Standard Contract terms and Procurement Guide. 	<p>WINTER 2003/04 WINTER 2003/04 DUE TO BE PRODUCED SPRING 2004 WINTER 2003/04 WINTER 2003/04 WINTER/SPRING 2004 DECEMBER 2004 2004 2004 WINTER 2003</p>
On-going Revision of Customer Care Standards	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Survey Customers – annual through existing consultation 2. Survey Staff - annual through staff survey. Possibly through Council employee survey (liaison with HR or bespoke Customer Service survey in conjunction with Consultation Officer) 3. Analysis of Customer Experience Management Data – annual review of trends 4. Development of customer feedback from individuals/groups with special needs 	<p>Spring 2004 AUTUMN 2003</p> <p>SPRING 2004, THEN ANNUALLY EVERY SPRING SUMMER 2004</p>

Customer Care Skills & Knowledge

To develop a modular portfolio of Customer Care training (in-house and external) to equip our employees with the skills and knowledge they require to meet the Council's Customer Care standards. The training will progress from Induction through to Corporate Customer Care and include tailored programmes as required based on feedback from our employees and customers.

Public service employees can often come in to contact with customers that are in distress and angry sometimes at having to comply with legislation we have a duty to enforce. We must equip our employees with the skills they need to deal with such sensitive issues so that the highest level care is given to our customers.

Inevitably in a large organisation things do go wrong from time to time. The important thing is how we go about fixing the problem and the Customer Care skills that are used in service recovery and making a change to ensure that the same mistake is less likely to occur again.

When a contractor provides Council services it is essential that the procuring officer evaluate companies on the basis of the Customer Care training that they provide to their employees. If appropriate it is suggested that contractors are compelled to send their employees on Council Customer Care training courses if they do not provide their own or if customer care performance issues arise in the duration of the contract.

Area	Action Points	Target Completion Date
Induction Training	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Generic Customer Care Introduction 2. Uniform Telephone Training 3. Uniform Comments, Compliments and Complaints Training 	COMPLETED, IN PLACE AUTUMN 2003 AUTUMN 2003
Corporate Training Programme based on Customer Care Standards	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Production of Best Practice Guide to Customer Contact 2. Establishment of modular programme to cover: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Putting People First - Relating to Your Customers Workbook programme for all staff developed with Human Resources b) Introduction to Diversity (2 Hours) developed with the Equalities Officer c) Contact Skills and Standards: i) Telephone ii) Face to Face iii) Writing including E-mail (Half Day) d) Dealing with Conflict (2 hours) e) Dealing with Comments, Compliments and Complaints (2 Hours) 	WINTER 2003 LAUNCH SPRING 2004 AVAILABLE WINTER 2003/04 AVAILABLE WINTER 2003/04 AVAILABLE WINTER 2003/04 AVAILABLE AUTUMN 2003

Area	Action Points	Target Completion Date
Corporate Approved Customer Care External Courses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Writing Skills Course (updated course from Human Resources) 2. Diversity Training (from Equalities Steering Group) 3. From Complaint to Compliment - Staff Training 4. From Complaint to Compliment – Manager Training 5. Customer Conflict Workshop (from Risk Manager) 6. Establish a framework of Equal Access training for service delivery staff e.g. serving physically disabled customers 	<p>COMPLETED, IN PLACE COMPLETED, IN PLACE LAUNCH WINTER 2003/04 TWICE YEARLY SPRING AND AUTUMN) TWICE YEARLY SPRING AND AUTUMN SUMMER 2004</p>
Best practice framework for Customer Care training linked to NVQ's/Industry Standards	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction of further best practice training in Customer Service 2. Feasibility of Corporate Membership to Institute of Customer Service 3. Introduction of NVQ qualifications in Customer Service (all with Human Resources) 	<p>INVESTIGATE 2004 WINTER/SPRING 2004 2004/05</p>
Development of Customer Care Competencies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Further development of Customer Care Competencies based on job grades/groupings (with Human Resources) 	<p>WINTER 2003</p>

Customer Experience Management

To provide a systematic and co-ordinated approach to measuring and managing customer feedback. To ensure that this feedback is used to develop continuous improvement in delivering excellence in Customer Care.

In order to deliver what our customers regard as excellent customer care we must establish what they expect and whether we meet those expectations. It is also important to establish employee opinion towards customer service and access to the tools that are needed to deliver better Customer Care.

Specific action will be taken with the Equalities Officer to ensure that the views and experiences of those with special needs such as disabilities or language requirements are captured.

Area	Action Points	Target Completion Date
Comments, Compliments and Complaints	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Launch revised Comments, Compliments and Complaints database 2. Develop analysis of corrective action, publicise action taken 3. Develop analysis of comments, compliments and complaints passed to partners and contractors 4. Establish standardised performance report for Directorates, prepared by Customer Relations Officers 5. Six month reporting of Comments Compliments and Complaints to Management Board, Performance and Review Committee, Standards Committee 6. Publication of six month performance in NHDC News and Outlook 	<p>OCTOBER 2003 TRIAL WINTER 2003 MAY 2004</p> <p>WINTER 2003</p> <p>OCTOBER AND MAY YEARLY</p> <p>OCTOBER AND MAY YEARLY</p>
Telephone Mystery Shopping – Internal	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Internal <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Three reports to Directorates a year b) Combine results with Quarterly Logger report to form new Telephone Performance Report c) Report results in Telephone Performance Report to Management Board and Performance and Review Committee 	<p>JUNE, OCTOBER AND FEBRUARY DECEMBER 2003</p> <p>DECEMBER 2003, THEN OCTOBER, JANUARY, MAY ANNUALLY</p>

Area	Action Points	Target Completion Date
Telephone Mystery Shopping – External	2. External <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Maintain existing survey based on three mystery shops during the year, investigate feasibility to move to a quarterly programme b) Review focus of each mystery shop with the Access Channel Team to focus on areas of concern c) Report results of each survey to Management Board and Performance and Review Committee d) Publish annual results in the Performance and Review Plan e) Publish results in NHDC news and Outlook f) Promote results through Team Brief – Putting People First 	WINTER 2003 OCTOBER, JANUARY, MAY ANNUALLY OCTOBER, JANUARY, MAY ANNUALLY APRIL ANNUALLY APRIL ANNUALLY OCTOBER, JANUARY, MAY ANNUALLY
Staff Service Delivery Survey	1. Investigate possibility of running survey in conjunction with HR 2. Investigate possibility of using resources in Consultation unit to assist in survey using SNAP 3. Draft and Pilot survey 4. Roll out annual survey	AUTUMN 2003 AUTUMN 2003 WINTER 2003/04 2004
Benchmarking	1. Annual meeting of Customer Care Forum Hertfordshire Councils 2. Investigate options of benchmarking through membership of the Institute of Customer Service with i) public sector and ii) private sector organisations 3. Organise programme of comparative surveys (utilising SNAP on our website) focused on key areas of Customer Care: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Complaints b) Customer Care Standards c) Equal Access d) Customer Service Centres/Shops 	AUTUMN 2003 WINTER 2003/04 2004

Area	Action Points	Target Completion Date
Consultation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plan approach to Customer Consultation regarding Customer Care with Best Value unit <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Citizen Panel b) District Wide Survey c) Equal Access Groups with the Equalities Officer 2. Develop digest of customer feedback from best value reviews with the Consultation unit of Best Value 3. Investigate approach with Partnerships 4. Investigate approach to key contractors 	AUTUMN/WINTER 2003/04 2004 2004 2004
Customer Relationship Management	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Purchase new telephone system that integrates telephone directories and allows the voice system to integrate with data systems 2. Establish requirements of CRM system to provide customer performance information, linked to Best Value and the Local Performance Plan 3. Review best practice in CRM solutions in Local Government 4. Review readiness for CRM in relation to IT strategy 5. Review the appropriate type of CRM for North Herts District Council 6. Provide input to Service Delivery Strategy to process map processes to be covered 	AUTUMN 2003 WINTER 2003/04 WINTER 2003/04 SPRING 2004 SPRING 2004 SUMMER 2004
Website Feedback	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop Customer Care questionnaire for the Council web site, utilise SNAP consultation tool 	WINTER 2003
Upgrading of Telephone Logger	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Monthly Telephone Logger reports to Directorates 2. Establish feasibility of including new reports within phone system 3. Roll out of new standard reports to business areas 4. Roll out of new quarterly Corporate reporting 5. Include reports with Telephone Mystery Shopper reports to Member to form new Telephone Performance Report 	MONTHLY WINTER 2003 WINTER 2003 SPRING 2004 AUTUMN 2004
Comment Cards	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Integrate Comment Card reporting facility into Comments, Compliments and Complaints database 2. Extend trial of Comment Cards 	AUTUMN 2003 SPRING 2004