

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL
Resources Committee April 15th 2009

Agenda Item	
Report No	

Customer Service Strategy
Report by the Head of E-Government

SUMMARY

This report presents a summary of the Council's draft Strategy for Customer Services for the period 2009 – 2012. The strategy outlines the development of the Customer Services function to date and the plans for the future. The strategy will continue to be revised as the Council's business needs are developed as part of the Council's Corporate Improvement Programme.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Highland Council is committed to the delivery of excellent customer service. The strategy gives customers, members, managers and staff a clear direction for the delivery of customer services over the next five years.
- 1.2 The Strategy builds on the Council's success in Customer Services to date and outlines how the Council will continue to develop its customer service function in line with the Corporate Improvement Programme to deliver real benefits to the Council and its customers.
- 1.3 The strategy is aligned with the aims of the Council as outlined in the "Strengthening the Highlands, Programme for the Highland Council 2009-2011" document. The strategy also takes account of the Council's Single Outcome Agreement, the Corporate Plan, the Corporate Improvement Programme and national government programmes such as the Customer First initiative. It will support the Council's efficiency agenda via more focused use of resources and partnership working, and underpin the work which is ongoing to develop the Council's values by ensuring that the delivery and development of services is focussed on the needs of the customer.

2. Purpose of the Customer Service Strategy

- 2.1 The purpose of the Customer Service strategy is to enable the delivery of high quality services to our customers. The Council's Customer Service Strategy will
 - Deliver a vision of the future for customer engagement within the Council, providing customers, members, managers, staff with a clear direction of how customer engagement should operate.
 - Enable the Council to carry out its business as effectively and efficiently as possible making the best use of its resources

- Support the continuous improvement of the Council in delivering high quality services
- Create a framework for the development of customer contact and engagement, by the development of existing services and systems and focusing on new opportunities for the modernisation and improvement of the customer services function
- Use technology to improve access to the Council and improve the Council's e-service offerings
- Ensure a professional and consistent approach to customer engagement across the Council, including specific training, development and qualification opportunities

2.2 The Scope of the Strategy includes all customer interaction including: telephone, mail, face to face, email or via self service and web interaction.

3. Vision for Customer Services

3.1 The Highland Council's vision is to be an efficient and effective Council, delivering quality customer service through a wide range of channels including telephone, face to face or via self service, e-mail and web interaction. Contact channels will be clearly defined, making contacting the Council an easy and positive experience for customers. We aim to:

- Increase choice for customers in the way they access services:
 - Provide an interactive Self Service Website.
 - Increase the opening hours of the Service Centre.
 - Extend facilities for debit/credit card telephony and on line payments.
 - Increase the number of services delivered through the customer service network.
 - Reduce the number of access doors to the Council.
- Provide a service which is consistent, professional and co-ordinated:
 - Resolve the majority of customer enquiries at the first point of contact by
 - assessing entitlements and benefits.
 - getting it right first time.
 - Reduce the number of repeat contacts from customers.
 - Reduce the volume of telephone numbers advertised for the Council.
- Become efficient and effective Council
 - Increase our partnership working e.g.
 - a) more co-located offices.
 - b) deliver services on behalf of our partners.
 - Promote self service channels.
 - Develop efficient and effective business processes

3.2 The results from the 2008 Public Performance Survey give us a clear indication of how customers contact us, what they contact us for and how satisfied they are with the service they receive. The Strategy recognises the changing trends in customer channels for contacting the Council.

3.3 This Strategy will demonstrate how The Highland Council intends to reduce the amount of access doors and further develop service provision within Service Points and the Service Centre. This will enable the majority of customers to be met with a member of staff who is skilled and trained to deal with customers and well equipped to resolve their enquiry at the first point of contact.

4 Proposed Developments

4.1 Whilst The Highland Council is continuously improving the way it delivers services to customers; there is more to achieve and more to do - this strategy will pave the way for the future and give our managers, and staff a clear direction for taking customer contact to the next level. Through new technologies The Highland Council will aim to deliver services that are joined up in a way that makes sense to customers. Services will be accessible in ways which are most convenient to the customer, so they have more choice over the way in which they contact and receive services. The Highland Council will tailor the service delivery to the individual customer needs and be customer centric from contact point to actual delivery.

4.2 The Strategy outlines a number of key developments for the Council including:

- Working with the Corporate Improvement Programme to further improve business processes and move resources into front line customer service, thereby enabling back offices to focus their efforts on complex enquiries, which require in-depth investigation, professional expertise and/or assessment that supports the front office.
- Increasing the number of services delivered in Service Points and the Service Centre
- Increasing Customer choice in respect of contact with the Council and providing opportunities to move to more cost effective ways of accessing the Council
- Increasing the number of customers dealt with at the first point of contact while reducing the number of referrals to the back office.
- Reviewing the structure and opening hours of the Customer Services network to make it more accessible
- Reviewing the technology, CRM and telephony systems in order to improve customer records, data sharing and e-service offerings
- Consolidating existing partnership and seeking new partnership opportunities
- Achievement of the Scottish Government's Customer First Programme targets and the Council's own performance targets

5 Customer Satisfaction

5.1 Customer Service standards set out the level of service customers can expect and ensure consistent and fair treatment for all. The Scottish Government has set national targets which all councils must meet. These targets state that all councils must increase the number of core services that are delivered at the first point of contact, with 75% of all enquiries to be dealt with at the first point of contact, with a minimum customer satisfaction level of 95%. "First point of contact" is defined by the Scottish Government as a service request that has been satisfied to its final

conclusion without having to pass the service request to another party.

- 5.2** Within the Highland Council between 1st April 2008 – March 2009 there were a total of 477,224 requests processed through the CRM system. Management information indicates 90% of these requests were dealt with at the first point of contact.
- 5.3** The Customer Services Network undertakes out regular customer satisfaction interviews via telephone and face to face surveys with customers who have had their enquiries processed via the CRM system with the current satisfaction level being 96%. The public performance survey also measures the wider customer satisfaction with Council services and in 2008 82% of respondents questioned were satisfied with the services provided with the Council.
- 5.3** The Council's Customer Service standards include response levels for telephone calls, face to face waiting times and correspondence and complaint handling timescales. As part of the work to implement the strategy the Council will:
- Review service standards to ensure customers' expectations are met.
 - Monitor and evaluate comments, compliments and complaints.
 - Increase the number of surveys conducted by The Highland Council.
 - Carry out mystery shopping to bench mark our service against other Councils.
 - Undertake the new standard "Customer Excellence Award" which replaces the Charter Mark Standards.
 - Consult with customers through the Annual Performance Survey.
 - Monitor, review and improve on the results of the Public Performance Survey

6. Consultation and Impact Assessments

- 6.1** Officer consultation has taken place and the strategy has been circulated to the Council's Senior Management Team, the Corporate Improvement Programme Customer Engagement and Assessment Project Board, and Customer Services staff.
- 6.2** Separately the strategy has undergone initial screening for environmental impact assessment and equality impact assessment as detailed below. Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is the term used to describe the type of environmental assessment required under the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005. It is a process for the early identification and assessment of the likely significant environmental effects, both positive and negative, of certain plans programmes and strategies developed by the public sector. A SEA pre screening exercise took place on the 30th March 2009 which indicated that a full SEA was not required.
- 6.3** The legal duties on the public sector with regard to equality require that Equality Impact Assessments (EQIA) are carried out on all new policies and functions in the areas of Race, Disability and Gender. The Highland Council has agreed to adopt a holistic approach to assessments and include the strands of age, religion or belief and sexual orientation which are not currently covered by the public

duties. An Equality Impact Assessment is a pro-active step to ensure wherever possible preventative measures are taken to avoid discrimination or unfairness on any equality grounds before it occurs. A pre-screening exercise took place on 30th March 2009, which indicated that a full Equalities Impact Assessment is required. This will commence in April 2009, and as such it is suggested that members consider delegating responsibility for implementing any equality impact assessment actions to the Assistant Chief Executive.

7. Resources

As part of the work to develop the strategy the resource requirements will be reviewed on a regular basis by the Service Directors/Heads of Service, Assistant Chief Executive and the Head of E-Government as part of the ongoing management of the customer services function. Any additional resource requirements will be identified to the Customer Engagement and Assessment Project Board as part of the Council's Corporate Improvement Programme.

8. Governance

8.1.1 Progress against the strategy will be reported regularly to members though the Resources Committee. Specific responsibilities for Resources Committee under this strategy are:

- Agree the vision and the Customer Services Strategy
- Review the strategy on an annual basis
- Receive reports on performance against the strategy.

The ongoing work to deliver the strategy will be achieved through the Corporate Improvement Programme, specifically through Customer Engagement and Assessment Project Board chaired by the Assistant Chief Executive.

9 RECOMMENDATION

9.1 Members are invited to:

- i. Note and approve the Customer Services Strategy for the period 2009-2012
- ii. Delegate responsibility for implementation of the equalities impact assessment as outlined in section 6.3 to the Assistant Chief Executive

Signature:

Designation: Head of E-Government

Authors: Vicki Nairn, Tina Page

Date: 6.4.2009

Customer Service Strategy

2009 – 2012

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Highland Council Customer Service Strategy 2009 – 2012

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Highland Council is committed to delivering excellent Customer Services. This document outlines the Council's Customer Services Strategy for the period 2009-2012.

The Strategy is aligned with "Strengthening the Highlands - Programme for the Highlands 2009 - 2011", the Single Outcome Agreement, and the Council's Corporate Plan. It will ensure that the Council fulfils its duty to deliver Best Value by the delivery of effective and efficient front line Customer Services. The Strategy also takes account of the Scottish Government's Customer First Programme and by the Council's own Corporate Improvement Programme.

The Strategy outlines how the Council will put the citizen at the centre of service delivery to ensure an enhanced service experience, increasing choice for customers as to where they access services, when they access services and how they access services. It will also ensure that the Council continues to provide services which are consistent, professional and co-ordinated to ensure the customer is satisfied at the first point of contact.

To achieve these aims the Council will, via the Corporate Improvement Programme, identify and develop opportunities for the enhancement of the Customer Services Network in the delivery of front line services. As part of this work the Council will introduce more online facilities and self service opportunities, allowing customers to carry out routine tasks without requiring any interaction with a representative of the Council. This will enable The Highland Council to realise efficiencies and reinvest financial and time releasing savings in future developments.

As part of the development of the Strategy the Council will review its systems and technologies to ensure that systems enable and underpin the business in the most effective and innovative way possible. The Council will invest in training and development to ensure that Customer Service staff have the relevant skills and training to deliver excellent Customer Service.

The Council will continue to build and develop it's partnerships to deliver improved access to public services. It will become more convenient, easier and quicker for citizens to interact with the Council and all citizens will have equal access to the services they need. The Council will continue to be responsive to customers proactively engaging with them to seek their views via the public performance survey to provide a range of benefits, entitlements and services that can be delivered at the first point of contact.

This Strategy will continue the investment and modernisation work which has taken place to date within Customer Services and will ensure that the Council meets the needs of all of the people who live, work and visit the Highlands.

Part 1

1. Introduction

This document presents The Highland Council's Strategy for the delivery of Customer Service to the citizens in the communities of the Highlands. Every Local Authority should have an evolving Customer Service Strategy at the centre of their organisation.

The Highland Council Customer Service Strategy will:-

- Recognise and support political and management objectives.
- Respond to the diverse and changing needs of customers.
- Set out a clear vision for the development and delivery of services to customers.
- Deliver real benefits.

The Customer Service Strategy has been developed with reference to "Strengthening the Highlands, Programme for The Highland Council 2009 - 2011. The Customer Service Strategy is aligned with the aims of the Council and will "pursue best value for our residents and service users seeking efficiencies in the way we work and continuously strive to achieve our annual efficiency targets". Throughout the Strategy period, The Highland Council will consult with its stakeholders including customers. The Strategy underpins the work which is ongoing to develop the Council's values by ensuring that the delivery and development of services is focussed on the needs of the customer.

Consideration is given to The Highland Council's Single Outcome Agreement which focuses on efficiency savings and partnership working. The Highland Council has many Partners including the Northern Constabulary, National Health Service, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Citizens Advice Bureau. In addition Customer Service has very strong internal and external partnerships with organisations such as the Immigration and Passport Service and VisitScotland. The Highland Council Customer Service Partnership Working was noted and commended in the Charter Mark Report December 2008. The Strategy period will see a continuation of this work as The Highland Council aims to broaden and deepen the work it does on behalf of and in conjunction with its partners.

In addition the Customer Service Strategy is aligned with the Customer First Scottish Government Programme, which identifies Core Services which should be delivered at the first point of contact through the use of technologies, such as the Customer Relationship Management System, Citizen's Account and National Entitlement Card. The Customer First Agenda sets out definitive targets which all Councils should aim to achieve. The Highland Council has made a commitment to achieving these targets and they are embedded in the Highland Council Corporate Plan and managed through Service Plans.

The Council will: -

- a) Increase the number of core services that are delivered at the first point of contact, with 75% of all enquiries to be dealt with at the first point of contact.***
- b) Achieve up to 95% of customer satisfaction***

The Customer Service Strategy and the Customer First Initiative provides a framework for the Corporate Improvement Programme (CIP) Project “Customer Engagement/Customer Assessment”. The Customer Engagement & Assessment Project aims to simplify customer access to all Council Services and increase the percentage of enquiries dealt with at the first point of contact and to simplify and standardise the assessment processes to accelerate decisions and service delivery. The Strategy will be customer needs led and people, processes, technology and partnerships will enable the delivery of service at the first point of contact efficiently and effectively.

2. Vision

The Highland Council's vision is to be an efficient and effective Council, delivering quality Customer Service through a wide range of channels including telephone, face to face in a service point or via self service e-mail and web interaction. Contact channels will be clearly defined, making contacting the Council an easy and positive experience for customers.

We aim to;-

- Increase choice for customers in the way they access services:
 - Provide an interactive Self Service Website.
 - Increase the opening hours of the Service Centre.
 - Extend facilities for debit/credit card telephony and online payments.
 - Increase the number of services delivered through the customer service network
 - Reduce the number of access doors to the Council.
 - Ensure equality of access to services for all customers

- Provide a service which is consistent, professional and co-ordinated:
 - Resolve the majority of customer enquiries at the first point of contact by
 - a) assessing entitlements and benefits.
 - b) getting it right first time.
 - Reduce the number of repeat contacts from customers.
 - Reduce the volume of telephone numbers advertised for the Council.

- Become efficient and effective Council
 - Increase our partnership working e.g.
 - a) more co-located offices.
 - b) deliver services on behalf of our partners.
 - Promote self service channels.
 - Develop efficient and effective business processes

3. Scope

This is a Corporate Strategy and the scope includes all customer interaction including: telephone, mail, face to face, email or via self service and web interaction. The Council will via the Corporate Improvement Programme (Customer Engagement and Customer Assessment Project) ensure the Council extends and enhances the principles of Customer Excellence across the organisation.

4. Background

The Highland Council Customer Service

Customer Services sits within the E-Government section of the Chief Executive's Service. The Council has a network of 37 Service Points, the Service Centre at Alness and 38 Registration Offices. The Service Points and Service Centre act as 'one stop shops' for a wide variety of Council services and provide advice to the public for key Council and partner services.

During the past 5 years the Council has made significant investment in the modernisation of its Customer Services function. In 2004 the Council established the Service Centre in Alness to compliment Service Points and act as a hub for telephone contact and Blue Badge Processing. In 2005 the Council implemented a corporate Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system and rolled this out across the Council, allowing the Council for the first time, to have a computerised record of customer contacts and service requests made via the Customer Services Team.

In 2006 the Council reviewed Customer Services, bringing the Registration Service into Customer Services, and continued to develop joint facilities with internal services such as libraries and external partners such as VisitScotland. In 2008 new partnerships were developed between Customer Services and the Immigration and Passport Service with specific Service Points now acting as satellite offices for first time passport applicants, conducting an application interview via web-link.

This strategy will see our position change throughout 2009 – 2012 and therefore is "work in progress" and is ever changing to meet customers' expectations.

It is important to understand the current position, the operational structure, and service delivery so The Highland Council can build upon existing good practice to continue to improve the way we deliver services.

5. Current Service Delivery (Where are we now?)

5.1 Our Customers

The Highland Council serves a population of over 217,440 people over a geographical spread of 26,484 square kilometres.

The Highland Council conducts a Public Performance Survey annually. In 2008 11,000 households were surveyed. The results from the Public Performance Survey give a clear indication of how customers contact the Council, what they contact the Council for and how satisfied they are with the service they receive.

The following table demonstrates the channels customers currently use to contact the Council:

Table 2.2 Method of Contact

	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004
	%	%	%	%	%
By telephone	59	57	54	60	59
Personal visit	50	50	53	52	53
By letter	12	13	12	15	14
By E-mail (home computer)	8	6	4	5	4
Home visit by Council staff	2	2	2	3	4
By E-mail (public access computer)	2	1	n/a	n/a	n/a
Ward Forum	2	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Other	1	2	1	1	*
Through a Councillor	n/a	4	3	1	4

Base: Respondents who had contacted The Highland Council during the preceding 12 months (N=996)

Note: Multiple responses were accepted.

* denotes less than 0.5% N/a denotes not asked

The Strategy recognises the changing trends in customer channels for contacting the Council as identified in the table above. The Public Performance Survey also describes a number of other channels customers would use to contact the Council.

The Council will explore opportunities for engaging with customers using these alternative methods of contact e.g. Interactive and digital TV Text messaging and Pod Casting.

The Customer Service Strategy aims to provide communities access to services within their local community wherever possible. The Highland Council's current Customer Service provision is demonstrated in Appendix 1 and 3. .

The following table demonstrates the number of customers who either contact a Service Point or the Service Centre to receive a service:

Customer Contact Volumes	2007	2008	2009
Service Centre Call volumes	299,188	301,973	306,855
Service Point Visits	926,554	843,636	895,410
Total Contacts	1,225,742	1,145,609	1,202,265

This Strategy will also demonstrate how The Highland Council intends to reduce the amount of access doors and further develop service provision within Service Points and Service Centre. This will enable the majority of customers to be met with a member of staff who is skilled and trained to deal with customers and well equipped to resolve their enquiry at the first point of contact.

5.2 Customer First

Customer First Government Targets are as follows:

- a) ***Increase the number of core services that are delivered at the first point of contact, with 75% of all enquiries to be dealt with at the first point of contact.***

The Customer First Agenda highlights 46 core services that all Scottish Council's should aim to deliver at first point of contact. A complete list of those services is available in Appendix 2. The Highland Council Customer Services are currently delivering **55%** of the core services at first point. "First point of contact" is defined by the Scottish Government as a service request that has been satisfied to its final conclusion without having to pass the service request to another party.

From April 2007 – March 2008 there were a total of 477,224 requests processed through the CRM. Management information available indicates **90%** of service requests processed through the Customer Services were dealt with at the first point of contact.

The Highland Council Corporate target expects a deliverable of **90%** of all enquiries to be dealt with at first point of contact by 2011.

- b) ***To achieve up to 95% of customer satisfaction.***

The Highland Council has endorsed this target and Customer Service Network has carried out a combination of automated telephony surveys and face to face surveys with customers and the current satisfaction level is **96%**.

5.3 Current Customer Service Standards

The Highland Council Corporate Standards make a commitment to our customers to ensure:

- Calls will be answered within 10 rings (telephony).
- Customers will be seen within 10 minutes (face to face).
- A response is made to customer requests within 10 days (all contact types).

The standards leaflet is available on:

<http://www.highland.gov.uk/livinghere/servicepointnetwork>

5.4 Charter Mark

The National Chartermark Assessment "Customer Service Excellence" accreditation was developed to offer public services a practical tool for driving customer-focused change within their organisation. The Highland Council Customer Service has retained Charter Mark for 3 years. In 2008 the Council not only retained full compliance in all standards but received Compliance Plus or "Best Practice" in the following criteria:

- The service meets the needs of customers.

- The Council provides service flexibly to give people choice.
- The Council makes arrangements with other providers to provide a coordinated service.
- Customers know how to access coordinated services.

The Council met an additional 2 areas of Best Practice in:

- a) “using technology to improve service to customers”
- b) “using technology to offer best value for money”

During the Period of the Strategy it is the Council’s intention to share best practice across the organisation and review the readiness for a Council wide assessment in Customer Excellence.

5.5 CRM

The period 2003 – 2008 saw a transformation on how The Highland Council manages customer contact. In 2003 a Customer Relation Management System for the tracking of enquiries and complaints was introduced. The main front line services offered through the CRM are Blue Badge applications, bulky uplift requests, house repairs, general enquiries and complaints.

The CRM system provides the Council with an audit trail for all relevant customer transactions. A Members Portal was added in 2006 to provide members with a facility to track and audit enquiries and service requests raised by their constituents.

5.6 Service Centre

The Service Centre handles approximately 1300 – 1600 calls per day. The current staffing structure consists of 17.5 full time equivalents (FTE) Service Centre Assistants, 2 Service Centre Officers and 1 Service Centre Manager.

The Service Centre provides customers with telephone access to a number of services such as Blue Badge, travel card, house repair, bulky uplift, raising an enquiry and complaint or compliment. In addition the Service Centre has handled adhoc services such as the Elections Helpline.

5.7 Service Points

The Service Point Network includes 37 Service Points providing a service for the Highland Communities at a local level. There are currently 68.4 FTE Service Point Assistants, 37 Service Point Officers and 6 Senior Service Point Officers. The Service Points continue to offer customers’ a choice of contact channel and in rural localities they provide a vital link for the community they serve.

Opening hours are tailored to local demand and efficiencies are met through partnership working such as joint libraries, registration offices, VisitScotland.

5.8 Registration

There is a network of Registration Offices across the Highlands, which work within the statutory remit of the General Registrar for Scotland. Their main functions are to conduct civil marriage ceremonies, or civil partnerships, citizenship ceremonies, record birth and deaths and conduct ancestry work. Many of The Highland Council's Service Points are joint Registration / Service Point Offices with staff trained in all aspects of both Service Point and Registration duties making the work both interesting and varied whilst providing a cost effective model for delivery.

5.9 Web

The Highland Council's current website was launched in April 2006 and attracts 6000 - 7000 visitors each weekday. It is supported by 2 FTE members of staff.

The site contains around 6000 pages. Visitors to the site most commonly seek information in relation to job vacancies, planning applications, schools information, Council minutes and agendas and details of how to contact the Council.

The internet continues to grow as a medium for contacting the Council with steady year on year increases. The number of visitors has increased from 103,402 in May 2006 (the first month after the new website was launched) to 180,523 in Jan 2009. The number of online payments per quarter has more than doubled and more than £680k was collected via this method in quarter 3 of 2008/09.

5.10 Partnerships

Partnerships are a predominant feature in the Service Delivery Model. Internal and External Partnerships are managed through a Service Level Agreement Framework. Customer Service provides access to a wide range of services including services delivered on behalf of The Highland Council's partners. Out of the current 37 Service Points 10 are partnership offices. A detailed breakdown of The Highland Council's partnerships, and the core functions delivered from Service Points and Registration Offices is available in Appendix 3 and 4.

During the December Charter Mark Assessment the Charter Mark Assessor commented on the flexibility and the uniqueness of the network and was impressed by the way The Highland Council was tailoring the Service to meet customer needs.

Part 2

6. A Picture of the Future

Whilst The Highland Council is continuously improving the way it delivers services to customers; there is more to achieve and more to do - this strategy will pave the way for the future and give our managers, and staff a clear direction for taking customer contact to the next level.

Through new technologies The Highland Council will aim to deliver services that are joined up in a way that makes sense to customers. Services will be accessible at in a way most convenient to the customer, so they have more choice over the way in which they contact and receive services. The Highland Council will tailor service delivery to the individual customer needs and be customer centric from contact point to actual delivery.

A key theme running through all National and Council targets is to improve efficiency and reduce costs. The following table of National Statistics demonstrates the cost to Councils for each contact channel. Throughout the Strategy period The Highland Council will look to develop and promote the most cost effective channel, whilst ensuring a range of channels is available to meet all individual customer needs.

The focus across all channels will be to improve efficiencies and effectiveness. The table below demonstrates the average costs per enquiry per contact channel.

Ref table 2

Socitm Insight March 2008 Data = Cost per contact channel for enquiry		
Access Channel	Average cost per enquiry	Level of Cos
Self service using the web	£0.17	low
By telephone	£4.00	low
Face-to-Face	£7.81	High

7. Delivering the Strategy (*What will we do?*)

Through ongoing management development work and the Corporate Improvement Programme, The Highland Council will identify services that are customer facing and deliverable at the first point of contact.

We will:

- Further improve business processes and move them into front line delivery “Customer Services”.
- Enable back offices to focus their efforts on complex enquiries, which require in-depth investigation, professional expertise and/or assessment that supports the front office.
- Increase the number of services delivered in Service Points and the Service Centre.
- Increase Customer choice in respect of contact with the Council e.g. choice of face to face, telephone or web contact.
- Increase contacts dealt with at the first point of contact.

The recent Public Performance Survey indicates a strong preference for telephone and face to face channels however; email and web contacts are increasing. To achieve the merging of customer preferences with the most cost effective channels (see ref table 2 section 6) The Highland Council will focus on three primary access channels in the early to medium terms of the strategy period.

These will be:

- Telephone
- Face-to-Face
- Self Service (Website / Email)

The Strategy will explore opportunities for engaging with customers using alternative methods of contact e.g. Interactive and digital TV Text messaging and Pod Casting. .

7.1 Telephone

Recent Public Performance Survey results demonstrate that the telephone is the most popular form of customer contact. Utilising the Customer Service Centre for telephony enquiries is a cost effective way of achieving efficiencies.

We will:

- Develop a telephony strategy to reduce the number of telephone numbers in the phone book, reducing the number of advertised telephone numbers for the Council
- Centralise call handling to the Service Centre where appropriate.
- Increase the opening hours of the Service Centre with the ultimate aim to deliver a telephony service 24/7; hence providing access to services over the telephone anytime.
- Introduce telephony payments.

7.2 Face to Face

In a large number of transactions, face to face contact is still the preferred method of contacting the Council. Recent Performance Survey results demonstrate 50% of our

customers' surveyed contact the Council in person. The 37 Service Points located throughout the communities within the Highlands provide customers with the opportunity for a face to face transaction. In some instances Service Points are a vital link to service provision within rural communities, however, they need to be sustainable.

Throughout the strategy period, consideration will be given to the needs of those local communities and The Highland Council will apply the delivery model which best suits their needs.

We will:

- Increase partnership activity in the rural communities.
- Promote self serve and telephony as much as possible.
- Increase services dealt with at Service Points
- Reduce the number of 'front doors' making it easier for customers to access services and link service delivery across the Council e.g. combined library and service points.

7.3 Self Service

Website / E mail (Self Service)

Self-service will allow customers to access information any time from within their own home. Customers will be able to carry out routine tasks without requiring any interaction with a representative of the Council. The Highland Council expects to realise significant financial and time releasing savings by encouraging and promoting customer self service. To enhance future development of the website;

We will:

- Introduce more online payment facilities.
- Introduce more online application forms.
- Introduce self serve requests including the ability to apply for benefits, complete an e form to request a service, to book a Council facility or service and, if necessary, pay for these services.

In addition the volume of customers who choose to use e mail to communicate with us is increasing. All service requests that come into Customer Service via email will be processed through the CRM. Customers who choose this option often expect a faster response rate from this service than traditional postal methods.

We will:

- Develop service standards around these raised customer expectations.
- Increase access via e mail.

Self Service Points

We will review the opportunities for Self Service Points. This model requires the setting up of PCs with access to web based portals based in community facilities such as schools, libraries etc. The facility should access local information, enable service requests using online forms and be strategically placed in locations suitable for each local community concerned. This compliments the existing Peoples Network Public Access already available through Public Libraries.

8. Customer Satisfaction

An increase in Customer Satisfaction will be a measure of the success of the Strategy. The Highland Council values the views of its customers.

Customer Service standards set out the level of service customers can expect and ensure consistent and fair treatment for all. The Council's customer service standards include response levels for telephone calls, face to face waiting times and correspondence and complaint handling timescales.

We will:

- Review service standards to ensure customers' expectations are met.
- Monitor and evaluate comments, compliments and complaints.
- Increase the number of surveys conducted by The Highland Council.
- Carry out mystery shopping to bench mark our service against other Councils.
- Undertake the new standard "Customer Excellence Award" which replaces the Charter Mark Standards.
- Consult with customers through the Annual Performance Survey.
- Monitor, review and improve on the results of the Public Performance Survey.

9. Enablers (How will we deliver the strategy?)

In order to deliver the strategy the Council needs the correct infrastructure in place, a 'can do' attitude to making it happen; the correct people, skills and training in the right place at the right times. Customer Service needs the underpinning business processes required to deliver a service as well as the appropriate technology and effective partnerships.

The following section describes the key enablers of service delivery:

- Processes.
- Technology.
- People.
- Partnerships.

9.1 Processes

Excellent customer service can only be delivered by providing staff with current, accessible and relevant data and information. This, in turn, is achieved through the use of enabling technologies, underpinning efficient and effective business processes. A business process begins with a customer's need and ends with a customer's need fulfilment.

Business Processes are designed to add value for the customer and should not include unnecessary activities. The outcome of a well designed business process is increased effectiveness (value for the customer) and increased efficiency (less costs for the Council). In order to enable service improvement and deliver an efficient and faster service The Highland Council will:

- Review and redesign its business processes.
- Move processes to a front office delivery model.
- Ensure processes are fit for purpose, tried, tested and meet the needs of customers.
- Review business processes on a regular basis to ensure continuous improvement.

9.1.1 Assessing Customers Needs

Customer Service telephony and face to face staff will incorporate an assessment process to customer engagement wherever possible. Introducing an assessment element to initial customer engagement, will enable straight forward benefits and entitlements to be handled in the front office. Accomplishing this will enable back offices to deal with customers who have complex enquiries that require both in depth assessment and professional expertise.

9.1.2 Back Office and Front Office Relationship

The Highland Council will continue to develop and enhance the Customer Service processes to enable delivery at first point of contact. Underpinning this will be the staff in the services that will:

- Own and maintain the information that Customer Service staff access in order to deal with customer enquiries. Whether this is held on the internet, intranet or document management system and accessed through share point, ownership will always remain with the services.
- Decide where the cut-off is in any given situation before the customer is passed on for specialist advice.
- Support the implementation of new business processes to enable services to be routed through the Customer Service Centre and Service Points.

9.2 Technology

The Highland Council will continue to develop and enhance the customer service technology to enable delivery at first point of contact and data sharing. The Highland Council require a robust flexible CRM system that has the ability to integrate with other business critical Council systems. In addition the Customer First sub programmes Citizens Account and National Entitlement Cards will enable customers to access services using one SMART card.

We will:

- Review and upgrade CRM and integrate to other ICT systems such as Housing, Revenues and Benefits, Civica and Flare.
- Use Management Information to analyse and improve service delivery.

9.3 People

The Highland Council customers want to be assured that when they contact the Council their enquiry will be promptly dealt with by someone who is knowledgeable in the subject matter.

Customers expect staff to be professional, knowledgeable and empowered to resolve issues and complete transactions quickly and efficiently. Irrespective of the job, excellent customer service will always be an essential part of what The Highland Council set out to deliver.

9.3.1 People - Training

Investing in employees through appropriate training and development is key to the successful implementation of this Strategy. All staff who deal with customers on a routine basis will have access to a wide range of training programmes which are delivered by Employee Development including:

- Customer Care.
- Dealing with challenging behaviour.
- CRM Investigation Officer Portal – dealing with enquiries and complaints.
- Responding in writing effectively to customers.
- Equal opportunity and Diversity.

Customer Service Staff will undertake the new “Customer Service Professional Qualifications”. The qualifications were developed by Councils for Councils, and designed to be directly relevant to customer service issues within Scottish Local Authorities. The qualifications are nationally recognised, certificated by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and endorsed by COSLA and are portable across all Scottish Councils.

9.4 Partnerships

The Highland Council has many Partners including the Northern Constabulary, National Health Service, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Citizens Advice Bureau and the Immigration and Passport Service. Our commitment to the Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) requires closer partnership working which has already been identified as key to The Highland Council’s success and key to achieving efficiencies.

We will:

- Continue to work with internal and external partners in a Service Level Agreement Framework delivering services to customers.
- Continue to explore options for working with other agencies and organisations.

10. Benefits

Delivering the strategy will see real benefits for customers and the Council. The following table demonstrates those benefits:

For The Customer	For the Council
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easier access to Council Services. Including extended opening hours. • Choice of method of access: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Phone - Face to face - Internet / E mail - Mail / Fax - Self service hubs • No need to understand the Council's organisational structure. • Majority of enquiries and requests conclude at first time of asking. • No need to keep repeating your self when dealing with the Council. • More effective and efficient response to information & service requests. • Less of a need to keep following up on the status of an outstanding service request. • Less bureaucracy in form filling and paperwork. • Less engaged tones and unanswered calls. • Overall improvement in the standard of customer service delivered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved effectiveness of Front Offices Services, with staff more able to respond to enquiries. • A more consistent approach to the management and delivery of customer contact and service. • Reduced costs. • Greater integration between Council Services, linking Front and Back Office operations. • More informed decision-making through better use of management information about service usage, demand and customer preferences. • Greater job satisfaction and job variety for front line staff. • Staff more able to track progress with service requests, and to answer follow-up enquiries. • Use of Customer transaction history (i.e. Citizen Account) to better understand customer needs and enable service to be better targeted to eligible citizens.

11. Consultation and Inclusion

Throughout the strategy period the Council will consult with customers and stakeholders on issues affecting them. Communication is a two way process and through the Annual Public

Performance Survey, telephony and face to face Surveys the Council will capture the views of all our customers and respond appropriately in order to meet their needs and expectations.

The Council is committed to meeting the requirements of equal opportunities legislation for the six recognised equality strands (gender, race, disability, age, sexual orientation and religion or belief).

The Council aims to ensure that all customer service provision will be inclusive, based on the needs of customers and delivered without discrimination on the equality grounds referred to above.

The Customer Service Strategy is recognised as a significant area of the Council's work which could impact on equalities groups (potentially both negatively and positively).

The Strategy will ensure preventative measures are taken to avoid discrimination or unfairness on any equality grounds before it occurs.

In addition the Council will respond to any findings ensuing from a full Equalities Impact Assessment. The Strategy will ensure all customers and communities are not excluded from services.

12. Governance

The strategy will be approved by members at Resources Committee.

Specific Roles under this strategy are:

Resources Committee

- Agree the vision and the Customer Services Strategy
- Review the strategy on an annual basis
- Receive reports on performance against the strategy and implementation plan.

Senior Management Team

- Consider and recommend the Strategy to Resources Committee
- Ensure the development of the strategy is in line with the aims of the Corporate Improvement Programme.
- Scrutinise and recommend future Customer Services strategy, plans, and investments
- Manage service delivery to ensure focus on the customer and excellent customer service.

Assistant Chief Executive

The Assistant Chief Executive has executive responsibility for E-Government, including Customer Services, and represents the service at the Senior Management Team.

Corporate Improvement Programme

The Commitments and targets outlined in the Customer Service Strategy will be delivered through the Corporate Improvement Programme, specifically through Customer Engagement and Assessment Project. The Assistant Chief Executive is the project sponsor and the Head of E-Government is on the Project Board along with other Senior Managers.

Resources

As part of the work to develop the strategy the resource requirements will be reviewed on a regular basis by the Assistant Chief Executive and the Head of E-Government as part of the ongoing management of the Customer Services function. Any additional resource requirements will be identified to the Customer Engagement and Assessment Project Board as part of the Council's Corporate Improvement Programme.

Appendix 1
Map of Highland Council Customer Service Network



Appendix 2
Customer First – ESD Core Services

In terms of Electronic Service Delivery (ESD) all service activities (where feasible), should be delivered over multiple channel access – telephone, online and face-to face						
	Service Activity	The Highland Council Service	Service Activity Description	Delivering at first point of contact		
				Phone	Face to Face	On Line
1	Leisure & Recreation - Booking a Council facility and making a payment	Education Culture and Sport	The booking and payment of all sporting activities provided by the Council, or managed services supplied by an external service provider on behalf of the Council.	√	√	Partial
2	Public Library - Renewing, extending and reserving library books	Education Culture and Sport	Access to the full range of Council's Library Service for the loan, renewal, extending and reserving of all materials and products.	√	√	√
3	Council Tax - Making a Council Tax payment	Finance Service	The payment of Council Tax through multiple channels - e.g. Direct Debit, Internet payment, Voucher book, Paypoint, Over the Telephone, etc.	√	√	√
4	Council Tax - Making an enquiry about entitlement to benefit/discounts exemptions or relief	Finance Service	Citizens making specific Council Tax enquires about Entitlement to Benefit/Discounts/Exemptions and Relief.	√	√	Partial √
5	Council Tax - making an enquiry about banding, balance, direct debit or payment due date	Finance Service	Citizens making other specific Council Tax enquires	√	√	Partial

6	Council Tax - Applying for benefit, discount, exemption, relief and direct debit	Finance Service	Citizens making application for council tax benefit, discount, exemption, relief and to pay using direct debit.	Partial	√	Partial
7	Housing Benefit - Making a general enquiry or notifying change of circumstance	Finance Service	Citizens making general enquiries against housing benefit.	Partial	√	Partial
8	Housing Benefit - Applying for housing benefit	Finance Service	Citizens making application for housing benefit.	Partial	√	Partial
9	Housing - Requesting a repair	Housing Property and Architectural Services	The request and processing of a Housing Repair.	√	√	No
10	Housing - Enquiring about the status of a repair	Housing Property and Architectural Services	Advising on status of a Housing Repair.	√	√	No
11	Housing - Requesting general information and advice	Housing Property and Architectural Services	A request received for information and advice about any housing issue or problem.	√	√	√
12	Housing Rent - Making a payment	Finance Services	The payment of rent for Council house property.	√	√	√
13	Housing - Applying for a house	Housing Property and Architectural Services	The application for the request to obtain a Council house property.	√	√	√
14	Housing - Making an enquiry about status on the waiting list (including points)	Housing Property and Architectural Services	A request received for information about the status on a Waiting list for a Council house property. Also, specific information on the allocation of points in terms of an application.	√	√	No
15	Planning - Applying for planning permission and making a payment	Planning and Development Services	The process for making a Planning Application to the Council.	√	√	Partial
16	Planning - Enquiring about the status of a	Planning and Development Services	Advising on status of a requested Planning Application.	√	√	Partial

	requested planning application					
17	Refuse Collection - making a general enquiry about refuse collection	Transport Environmental and Community Services	Enquiries received and information provided on the collection of Business and Residential waste refuse.	√	√	Partial
18	Refuse Collection - Making a complaint about refuse collection	Transport Environmental and Community Services	Complaint about the Business and Residential waste refuse not collected on a regular basis (collection not made as per Council's schedule).	√	√	√
19	Street Light Fault - Reporting a fault	Transport Environmental and Community Services	Reporting of any defects and street lighting issues.	√	√	√
20	Roads and Pavements - Reporting faults with roads and pavements	Transport Environmental and Community Services	Reporting of any defects and faults relating to roads and pavements.	√	√	Partial
21	Special Uplift - requesting a special collection (including making payment where appropriate)	Transport Environmental and Community Services	Request made to the Council in respect of a Special Uplift. Full service provision includes completion of the request	√	√	No
22	Building Control - Applying for a building warrant (including making payment where appropriate)	Planning and Development Services	The process for making a Building Control Application to the Council. The primary objective being the processing of building warrants and completion certificates.	Partial	√	Partial
23	Pest Control - Requesting a service to deal with pests (including making payment where appropriate)	Transport Environmental and Community Services	Request from citizens and businesses to deal with pests that are harmful to public health and well being.	Partial	√	No

24	Pest Control - Reporting general instances of pest infestation	Transport Environmental and Community Services	General reporting from citizens and businesses of pests that may be harmful to public health and well being.	√	√	No
25	Education Grants - Applying for a clothing grant	Education Culture and Sport Service	An application for Education – Clothing Grant to assist with the cost of school clothing for state-maintained school pupils whose families are receiving particular state benefits or have a low income.	√	√	Partial
26	Education Grants - Applying for free school meals	Education Culture and Sport Service	An application for Free School Meals provided to children of families who are in receipt of appropriate social benefits.	√	√	Partial
27	Education Grants - Applying for an Education Maintenance Allowance	Education Culture and Sport Service	An application for Education Maintenance Allowances (EMA's) which is a government funded scheme to assist young people from lower income families to stay on in school for further education.	√	√	Partial
28	Education - Transferring pupil information between schools	Education Culture and Sport Service	Transfer and exchange of pupil information within a specific school and between schools using electronic mediation. i.e. electronic data management.	N/A	N/A	N/A
29	Education - Providing information for parents	Education Culture and Sport Service	Provision of information to parents specific to Education services.	√	√	Partial
30	Education - Recording pupil attendance in schools	Education Culture and Sport Service	Recording pupil attendance using registers facilitated by electronic mediation.	N/A	N/A	N/A

31	Education - Making a general enquiry about Lifelong Learning	Education Culture and Sport Service	Enquiries received by the Council specific to learning activities that are available within council facilities.	√	√	Partial
32	Education - Booking a course and other learning activities	Education Culture and Sport Service	Bookings received by the Council specific to learning activities that are available within council facilities.	√	√	√
33	Social Work - Ordering and Supplying Aids and Adaptations to the home	Social Work Services	The Process for making changes and obtaining aids for people who need help around the home.	√	√	No
34	Social Work - Assessing need for social care (Single Shared Assessment)	Social Work Services	The process for assessing and determining the social care requirements for an individual.	√	√	No
35	Social Work - Applying for Home Care	Social Work Services	Provision of home care and support to eligible people in their own home. This service may be provided by council staff or by a third party.	√	√	No
36	Social Work - Applying for social work services	Social Work Services	The process required to action referrals/enquiries through to provision of social services.	√	√	No
37	Blue Badge - Applying for a blue badge	Chief Executive Service	Application for people with severe walking difficulties, who are registered blind, or who have severe disabilities and may be eligible for a Blue Badge to allow vehicle parking in appropriate areas.	√	√	√
38	Corporate - Making a Complaint	Chief Executive Service	The process for dealing with Corporate Complaints received from receipt of enquiry to resolution of complaint.	√	√	√
39	Council - Notifying a	Chief Executive Service	The process to inform the Council about a	√	√	Partial

	change of address		citizen's change of address.			
40	Council - Applying for job with the Council	Chief Executive Service	The process for publication of council vacancies and managing recruitment through electronic mediation.	√	√	√
41	Registration - Registering a Birth, Death or Marriage (including making payment)	Chief Executive Service	The processes for the registration of births, deaths and marriages using electronic mediation where feasible.	No	√	No
42	Licensing - Applying for a Taxi Driver licence (including making payment)	Chief Executive Service	The process for any person to be authorised to drive a licensed private hire vehicle.	Partial	√	Partial
43	Licensing - Applying for a Street Trader licence (including making payment)	Chief Executive Service	The process for any Street Trading to be authorised before the selling or offering for sale of any article in the street.	Partial	√	Partial
44	Licensing - Applying for a Liquor licence (including making payment)	Chief Executive Service	The process for application to sell alcohol in hotels, pubs, discos, restaurants and shops.	Partial	√	Partial
45	Business Development - Applying for a Business Development Grant	Planning and Development Services	The process for the provision of grants to assist business development needs requirements within the council boundary.	Partial	√	Partial
46	Transport - Paying a Parking Fine	Transport Environmental and Community Services	The process to facilitate the payment of parking fines.	√	√	√

Please note: Not all 46 Services are deliverable across all channels. Further development work is in progress to meet our multi channel commitment.

Appendix 3
Highland Council Customer Service Delivery

The following table outlines the services which are available to customers throughout the Customer Service Network. In addition the Network offers a variety of partnership services which are detailed in Appendix 4.

Service Centre (Telephone Contacts)	Service Point (Face to face customers)	Registration
Request a bulky uplift Request a house repair Apply for a blue badge Apply for a travel card Request a form for a range of services Make a service enquiry Make contact via the web Make a rent or council tax enquiry Raise a complaint, make a comment or compliment	Make a payment Request a house repair Apply for a house Apply for a travel card Apply for benefits Make a rent enquiry or council tax enquiry Apply for blue badge Request a form for a range of services Raise a complaint, make a comment or compliment	Registration (Birth, Marriages, Deaths) Civil Partnership Archive records Ancestry research Citizenship ceremonies

Appendix 4

HIGHLAND COUNCIL CUSTOMER SERVICE PARTNERSHIPS

The Highland Council has a successful track record in developing and providing partnership services. In addition to its strategic Single Outcome Agreement Partners, The Council operates a wide range of partnerships services via the Customer Service Network.

LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

1	Registration of Births, Deaths & Marriages	Aviemore, Bettyhill, Broadford, Brora, Dornoch, Durness, Fort Augustus, Fortrose, Gairloch, Golspie, Grantown, Helmsdale, Invergordon, Kingussie, Kyle, Lairg, Lochcarron, Nairn, Tain Ullapool
2	Library Service	Ardersier, Bettyhill, Bonar Bridge, Broadford, Helmsdale, Kinlochleven, Mallaig
3	Visit Scotland	Dornoch, Drumnadrochit, Dunvegan & Durness
4	Identity & Passport Agency	Fort William, Kingussie, Lochcarron, Lochinver, Portree, Ullapool
5	Cairngorm National Park	Grantown
6	Local Woodland Trust	Grantown
7	Grantown Initiative	Grantown
8	Planning	Nairn
9	City Link (ticket selling agent)	Fort Augustus
10	Bio – mass energy	Aviemore
11	Citizens Advice Bureau	Bettyhill, Bonar Bridge, Dornoch, Lairg
12	DWP – Pension Service	Fort William, Fort Augustus, Fortrose, Golspie, Invergordon, Kyle, Lochcarron, Dingwall, Nairn, Ullapool, Dornoch, Gairloch
13	Credit Union Surgeries	Fort William
14	Mobile Banking Service	Bettyhill
15	NW Advice & Info Service	Durness
16	Money Advice	Grantown
17	Community Advice & Info Service	Grantown
18	Working For Families	Invergordon
19	NW Highland Geopark	Lochinver
20	Lochaber College	Mallaig
21	Highland Alcohol Counselling	Various – by appointment
22	Criminal Justice	Various – by appointment
23	MP/MSP Surgeries	Various – advertised locally
24	Local Councillor Surgeries	Various – advertised locally

FORTHCOMING PARTNERSHIPS

1	Northern Constabulary	Golspie Service Point
2	Citizens Advice Bureau	Golspie Service Point
3	Job Centre Plus	Various locations TBA

Background Papers and Supporting Documents

Background Papers		
1	Corporate Improvement Programme	
2	Extract from Single Outcome Agreement	
3	Corporate Plan	
4	Programme for the Highlands	
5	Service Plan	
6	ICT Strategy	
7	Charter Mark Report 2007 (2008)	
8	Performance survey report	
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