

CUSTOMER ACCESS STRATEGY 2020-2023

Folkestone & Hythe District Council
2020



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OUR VISION



Foreword by Cllr Field **Cabinet Member for Digital Transformation** **at Folkestone & Hythe District Council**

In this rapidly changing world how customers can interact with council services is crucial and it is with this context in mind that I am delighted to introduce our Customer Access Strategy.

The nature of interactions between each other have never been so important and the actions in this document have one priority – to make things easier, quicker, and more efficient for you.

Against the backdrop of 24/7 online shopping and soaring levels of smartphone ownership we recognise that the expectations of customers have changed and that we need to adapt to meet these demands.

We want to go further than the ‘digital by default’ principle already agreed within the organisation. Our ambition is that eventually every service and information request can be handled through a self-service system online that also works for mobile devices. We also want this experience to be inclusive, quick, easy, intuitive and relevant.

COVID-19 has accelerated the need for efficient non face to face channels in multiple industries. In these times of stretched local government funding this ‘channel shift’ away from face to face interactions – for services that can – has been a goal for many years. An online interaction with us costs an equivalent of £0.15 whereas a face to face one costs the equivalent of £8.62! So it’s simple to see that in areas where we can it makes sense for us to invest in technology and to design services that encourage this change in behaviour.

Our new My Account system – which will be launched shortly – is a huge step towards this shift. The new system will sit on our corporate website and allow residents – once logged in – to see personalised information such as their bin day, local councillors and even council tax and benefit information. More services will be added to this system over time making the process of finding tailored information quicker and easier for residents.

Let’s also not forget that when we save that £8.47 per interaction – when someone chooses to engage with us digitally rather than in person – we can then reinvest this into services such as keeping streets clean and maintaining parks and open spaces. This helps us keep our main promise – to you the resident – to deliver more of what matters.

Cllr Field

What is an Access Strategy?

A Customer Access Strategy focuses on the ways that both internal and external customers' access and transfer information. It takes into consideration customers' feedback to develop and implement plans to improve the way in which it delivers and receives day to day information about its services.

Why is an Access Strategy so important now?

The speed and way in which customers wish to interact and transact has changed over the past years. There has been an increase in the use of digital technology in business systems to not only analyse but also speed up the transfer of information. Increased functionality and use of mobile phones, computers and tablets has also led customers into a 24/7 way of requesting services and conducting business.

In the past 10 years local authorities have experienced financial pressures to pay for the running of local services. With these changes it is vital we review our systems and how we make information available, to improve our service to customers to be more efficient.

Our strategy has been developed on feedback from customers and their expectations of our services. Our Customer Services Team have helped identify why our customers contact us, and why they feel the need to contact us for further clarification.



Customer service principles



As part of our transformation programme, we have been looking in-depth at many of the processes we follow when delivering services to our customers. This is so we can make changes to them to ensure they are more efficient for the council and more importantly provide the best experience for the customer.

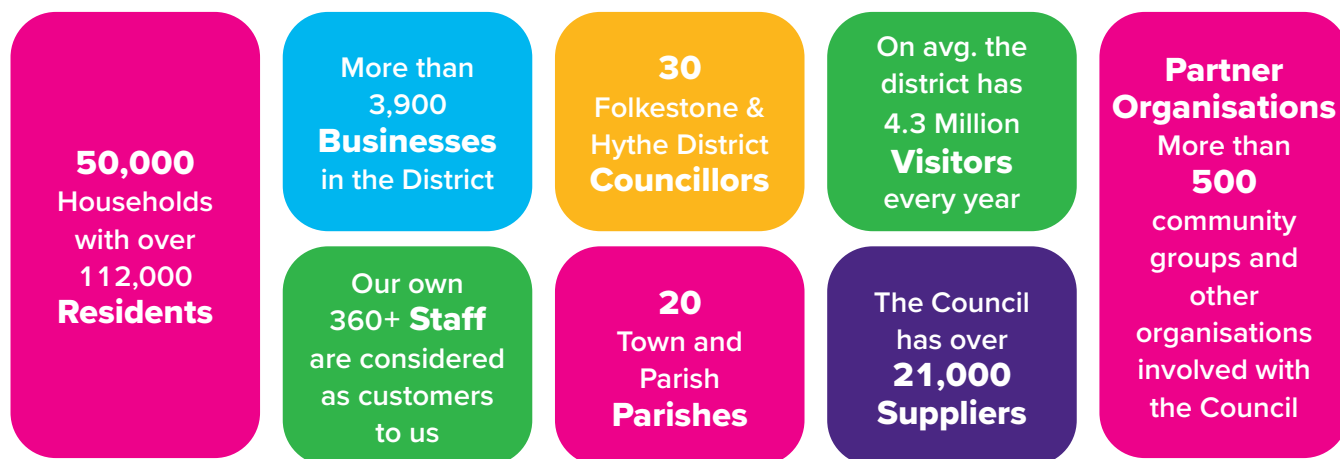


The council takes each of these processes and uses a set of defined principles to ensure the customer experience is the first consideration when redesigning them.

In total there are 13 design principles and 11 have been used in the development of our Customer Access Strategy.

Who are our customers?

A large percentage of our customers are residents in our district and the majority of our focus is around supporting them. However, we consider other groups who have contact with us as customers too. These include businesses, other councils, government departments, visitors, partner organisations, staff, councillors, media and more.



Customer feedback

It is important when looking at improving customer services that we listen to the customer to ensure we are delivering what the customer needs and not what we believe they need. To understand this in detail our customer services team have been capturing customer feedback on how we could improve access to our services.

We have listed some of the key comments below and we will continue to seek customer feedback to help us design and improve our services in the future.

Inform us how long a service will take – tell us at the beginning how long it will take

Give us progress updates – we want to know what is happening with our requests

Sometimes I just need help – I may need to speak to someone about a complex enquiry

Don't hide information – Information and services should be easy to find on the website

Help us – Support us to use online services when we don't have access at home

Don't keep passing me to the next person – resolve my enquiry at first contact

24/7 availability – I work all week and need to access services outside of working hours

Make forms easy to complete – only ask me question you need me to answer

Don't baffle me with words – use Plain English that is easy to understand on your website and communication

OUR STORY SO FAR

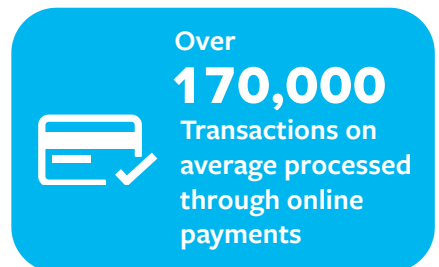
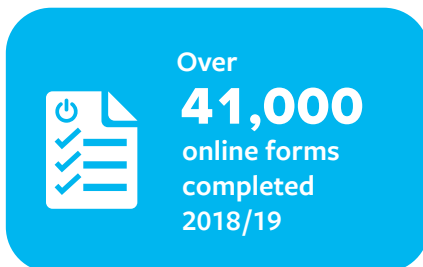
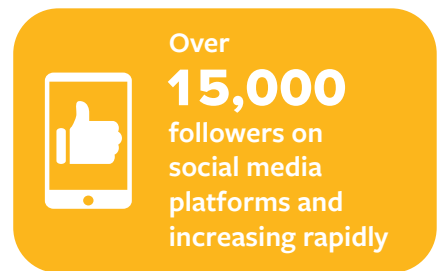
With a 'digital by default' principle already agreed, the ambition is that every service and information request can be handled by online self-service, on mobile devices, designed in a way that access is inclusive, quick, easy, intuitive and relevant.

The top four call types taken by Customer Services:

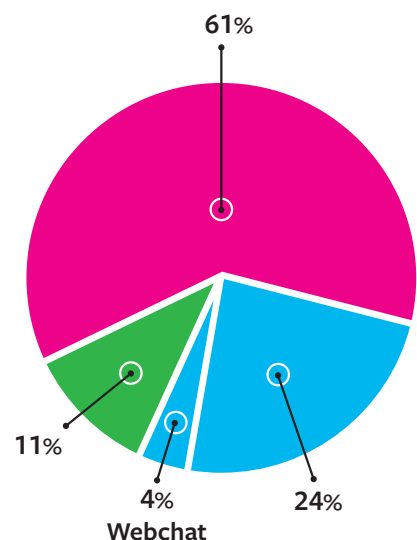
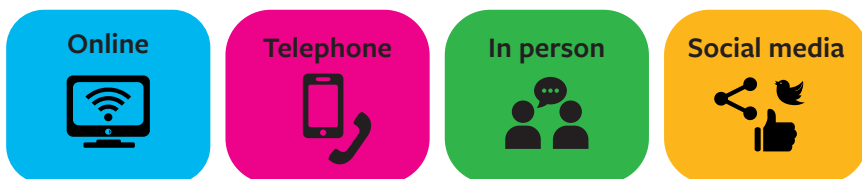
1. Council tax (20,000+)
2. Benefits (16,000+)
3. Waste and recycling (14,000+)
4. Housing options (10,000+)

We recognise that not every customer can access our services online and although online represents the most cost efficient way for us to provide services (in a time where all local authorities are having to work with under financial pressures) not all customers have the ability or the confidence to use online access without support.

We are committed to continue and improve online self-service access at our office, providing customer support using new technology to ensure efficient processing of information, whilst encouraging customers to embrace and be more confident in using online services.



Our current look at the contact coming into the council via the four main channels shows us that contact to us via telephone far outweighs any other contact channel.



Currently 61% of all customer contact with the council is by telephone, with only 28% using online channels.

Channel Shift

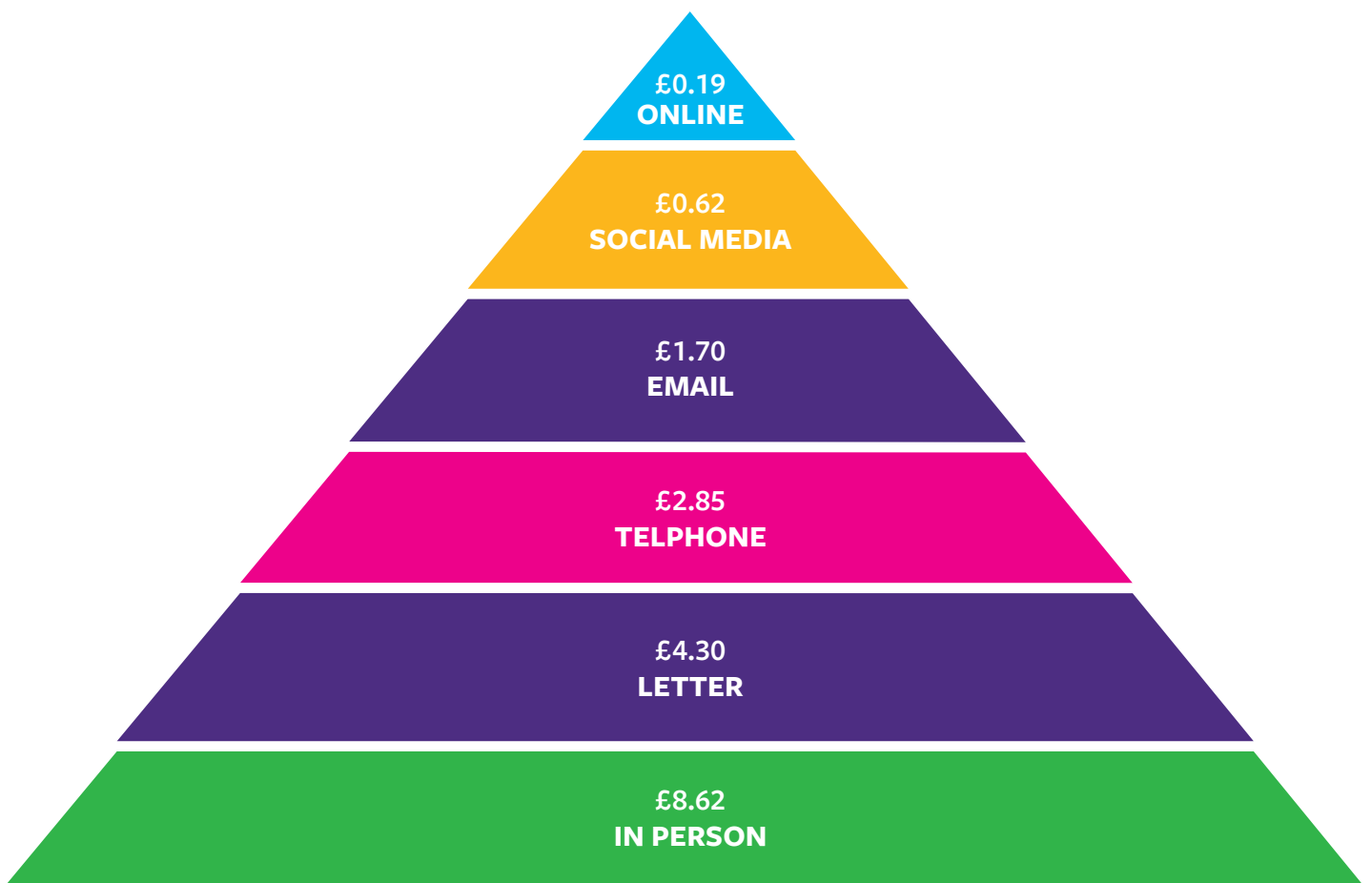
Council customers demand for 24/7 self-service and quick access to information has increased. The purpose of this strategy is to outline improvements to meet this demand, whilst balancing financial pressures and maintaining a quality service.

We are introducing an online self-service customer account called My Account, which pulls a customer's council service activities into one place, providing real time information and transactional ability.

By increasing options for customers to connect and transact with their information online, will free up resources to support other customers who are unable to go online and those with more complex enquiries.

The following graphic shows the average transactional cost per customer access channel, and includes cost of resources and infrastructure.

The graphic clearly shows a lower cost for online automated channels. The more customers move to online channels, there will be a greater reduction in costs for the council.



Most organisations today have an online presence. Customers can create their own profile accounts, enabling them to obtain relevant information and transact quicker in their own time. Feedback shows that council customers are no different.

Our channel shift main drivers

To meet the requirements of a large percentage of our customers by enabling them to interact with us and request services at a time that most suits them and not restricted to office hours.

Reduce the cost of access channels to the council to help deliver the same services at a lower cost without having to cut services.

Reducing contact coming into the council via channels that are resource intensive to enable us to use those resources to deal with the more complex cases and vulnerable customers who need it.

Becoming a more environmentally friendly council by reducing the amount of travel to our offices and reducing the paper channels where possible.

A **strategy** to meet customer expectations by delivering services online and **improving** the customer experience, whilst at the same time moving contact to the lower cost (digital) channels.

Not only do people expect to be able to access services online, according to the Office for National Statistics 8 out of 10 people are accessing the internet on mobile devices. Therefore there is a big expectation for those online services to be available and easy to use on mobile devices.

93%
of all households
had access to
the internet
in 2019

99%
of all adults aged
16–44 recently
used the internet
compared with
47%
of adults
75 and over

87%
of all adults used
the internet daily
or almost every
day in 2019

In 2019
54%
More than half of
adults aged 65+
shopped online

Customer Access Strategy Plan of Action

Although there is good progress in developing self-service, further work needs to be undertaken to ensure that as many transactional services are fully digital and automated by the end of 2021. This strategy seeks to move towards that objective.

Folkstone & Hythe District Council's digital planning is now well-advanced but will be under continuing review to ensure it aligns with this strategy.



Good quality data on customer contact can help track progress and better understand the interactions and drivers.

It is this data that will support this strategy and help us evaluate the success over the duration of the strategy. Our plan of action tables on the following pages show the planned work throughout the council to achieve our customer access aspirations. Through the continued transformation of our services and how our customers access them, we will improve our efficiency and the customer service we provide.

The tables cover the four main access channels our customers use

1. Online
2. Telephone
3. Social Media
4. In Person



Online



Many of our customers find the easiest way to access our services is online as they are able to do this at a time that suits them.

We have a number of online forms available on our website and we will continue to make more services available through this channel whilst improving the customer experience.

We also provide support through our web chat service for many of our online services should customers need assistance.

Principle	Action	How will we achieve it	Timeline
Keeping customers informed	Real time updates online	Our My Account will focus on access to real time status updates on transactions for a wide variety of services. This will include information about Council Tax payments and housing benefit amounts due and how they were calculated.	Q3 20/21
	Informed of changes in services in my area such as a change of bin date collection due to Christmas or bad weather, local councillor changes etc.	Via our My Account pages our customers will be able to see real time changes to such information relevant to them or their property. We will have a signup notification service to push out notifications to update people faster should they wish to sign up for them.	Q3 20/21
	Form completion progress	Using sections on longer forms, we will indicate how far the customer is through the form enabling them to estimate completion time remaining.	Q3 20/21
Focus on the customer experience	Improving the communication to and from our customers	To reduce the postage costs and time delays caused by print and postage of physical letters, we will review each process the council has with a view to promoting emails and texts as the default update and communication methods where possible within the systems and where possible with the customer.	Q3 20/21 –Q2 21/22
	Ensure that our customers can use any device to access online services	All our online solutions are mobile responsive and will resize pages depending on what device you are using to access them and will be available wherever an internet connection is available.	Q4 20/21
	Place self-service devices	We will investigate areas of possible funding to allow us to place self-service devices in high footfall areas such as doctors surgeries, libraries and other partners of the council to improve the digital offering and self-service capabilities in the district.	Q4 20/21



Online continued

Principle	Action	How will we achieve it	Timeline
Focus on the customer experience	Help improve the overall digital skill level within the District to help more people interact with us using the online channel	We will work with partners such as 'Digital Eagles' to provide training workshops at the council offices and other locations to help improve people's digital skills and to encourage them how they can access services from their own homes.	Q2 21/22
	Continually add new services online that have not been online before	By undertaking regular customer feedback sessions and surveys, it will enable us to continuously measure each customer access channel to identify areas of improvement and additional services we can make available online where demand is high via other channels.	Start Q3 20/21
	Additional online payments capabilities	We will add the ability to make online payments using our forms technology for as many services as possible and fully automate payments live into our systems.	Start Q3 20/21
Proactively prevent and shape demand	Answer questions before the need to contact the council where possible	We will be adding FAQs to our website informational pages to pre answer some of the questions our customers may have about our services	Q3 20/21 -Q1 21/22
Digital by default	Enable more services available online by choice	All new services looked at by the council will be designed for online access by default and then other channels opened up as appropriate	Q3 20/21 -Q4 20/21
	Digital signature availability	We will be identifying services that need a signature from our customers and providing the ability to do this online so they do not have to travel to our offices to provide it, where possible.	Q3 20/21
Real-time measurement to improve	Promote our customers to tell us where we can improve	We will be encouraging our customers to give us feedback of where we can improve, to enable us to focus our attention on improvements that our customers want, rather than what we think they want	Q2 20/21

Telephone



Whilst traditionally this has been the most preferred way of customers contacting us, we have seen a reduction in calls as more of our services have been made available online. As we continue to improve services and make more of them available online we expect this trend to continue. This will free up our resources to ensure we can support those customers who do not have access to the internet to use the online services.

Principle	Action	How will we achieve it	Timeline
Keeping customers informed	Use text message and email technology to reach out to our customers.	We will continue to encourage customers to 'sign up to' to our bin collection day message alerts and introduce other message alerts such as payment.	Q4 20/21
Supporting customers to do more	Make more payments by telephone available so customers don't have to wait in a queue.	We are increasing the use of both online and telephony automated payment services so customers will not have to wait for our staff to answer a call and take a payment.	Q3 20/21
	Reduce the amount of systems our customer service team has to look through when talking to our customers on the telephone during assisted self-service.	Our new Customer Relationship Platform links together customer information, so our staff can view this in one place as much as possible and not have to learn and access multiple systems.	Q3 20/21– Q1 21/22
	Assisted self-service for those who can't access services from their own home.	We will ensure that for most services, we complete the same service request and information forms that our customers would do online themselves to ensure the same process and timelines are started. As a result a lot of the online benefit will be achieved in the same way just started by us on our customers behalf.	Q3 20/21 –Q1 21/22
Resolve first time	Resolve customer enquiries first time, or triage to the correct resource with the least amount of handover possible	By multi skilling our customer services team to provide the best chance of answering your question at first point of contact with the aim to reduce the call times.	Q4 20/21
		To reduce the amount of time our customers have to be transferred to someone else in the council to answer their questions or deal with their enquiry, we are bringing more services into customer services.	Q4 20/21
		We are configuring the new telephone system to route customer calls to reach the best person to deal with requests first time.	Q3 20/21



Telephone continued

Principle	Action	How will we achieve it	Timeline
Resolve first time	Resolve customer enquiries first time, or triage to the correct resource with the least amount of handover possible.	Our new telephone contact solution allows us to add improved messaging to the beginning of calls and route customers to the right place.	Q3 20/21
Efficient working	Make best use of telephone technology to increase working resources.	We are increasing our 'Working anywhere' capabilities for our staff using our new telephone system which allows staff, who are unable to work from the office, to continue to respond to customer enquiries.	Ongoing

In person



Over the last few years we have seen a reduction of customers coming into our offices as more of our services have been made available online. We expect this trend to continue as we improve services and make more of them available online. 2020 has seen a big push to enable services online as default and as a result we will be looking closely at the resources needed for necessary opening times of the council offices.

Principle	Action	How will we achieve it	Timeline
Resolve first time	Resolve customer enquiries first time, or triage to the correct resource with the least amount of handover possible.	By increasing the amount of training we provide our frontline customer services team, we will be able to empower them to deal with more enquires through to completion and reduce the waiting time of our customers should they need to visit the council office.	Q2 20/21 -Q1 21/22
		Upgrade technology solutions so that staff are able to answer most customer queries at the first point of contact with a lot of the customer information in one place and encourage our customers to do so online for future transactions.	Q3 20/21
Efficient working	Change the reception area design to avoid delays caused by the current reception environment.	Redesign the council office reception area to introduce clearer flow to areas such as self-service and visitor waiting etc. to reduce the delay in those who want to use such services.	Q4 20/21



In person continued

Principle	Action	How will we achieve it	Timeline
Efficient working	Change the reception area design to avoid delays caused by the current reception environment	We will be replacing the old style reception desk environment and introducing a walk around meet and greet style customer service with the aim to flow people to the right area quicker and help our staff encourage future self-service.	Q4 20/21
		We are introducing a self-service visitor solution to enable visitors to sign in and let their receiver know they are here, reducing the need for visitors to queue.	Q4 20/21
Making online available	Making self-service more accessible and reduce digital exclusion.	We will be increasing the amount of self-service desks available and ensuring that our customers who have no access to the internet can access the online services in the same way someone could from their own home.	Q4 20/21
		Continue to provide staff training to our customer service team on our online services and how best to assist customers to self-serve online.	Q2 20/21 - Ongoing
	To access our customer's information wherever our staff are in the building or on the streets	We are investing in technology such as mobile devices for staff who will be mobile in their role and ensuring those devices have access to the right information.	Q2 20/21
		By moving a lot of our systems into the cloud, it has made access to these systems available on any device that has an internet connection increasing the availability of customer and service information to all our staff wherever they are in the district.	Q4 20/21

Social media



Social Media helps us to communicate important information to our customers, including updates on services, what is happening in the district and to advise of any critical information such as bad weather affecting services. Customers use social media to provide feedback and to alert us of any problems in the district.

Principle	Action	How will we achieve it	Timeline
Keeping customers informed	Use social media to update our customers faster.	Reviewing our social media platforms will allow us to understand our customer needs, opinions and issues in the community so we can be proactive and prompt with our responses and information we provide.	Q3 20/21
Focus on the customer journey	Listen to compliments and complaints via social media to improve services.	Our social media channels will continue to be monitored for customer feedback to help improve our services.	Ongoing
	Speed up our response times to our customer service requests.	The introduction of our new Skype for Business platform allows our staff to speed up communication processes internally to resolve customer enquiries.	Q2 20/21
Making online available	Promote more contact through social media.	Proactively promoting our social media platforms to increase their use, will help us communicate with our customers quicker on time critical information such as bad weather affecting services. We will also integrate this into our customer account where possible as a communication tool.	Q3 20/21
	Make answers to general enquiries available 24/7 where at all possible.	We will investigate the use of artificial intelligence on our social media platforms to answer basic enquiries automatically without the customer having to wait for a response during working hours	Q1 21/22

Summary of expectations

- All services that can be made available online are online by the end of March 2022
- Customers are encouraged and supported to contact us through the 'MyAccount'
- By March 2022, the principle access channel for customers to contact and transact with us will be through the 'MyAccount'
- Communication and information for customers is improved, reducing the need for customers to contact us for clarification
- Reduce the demand for phone and 'in person' contact by the end of March 2022
- Resources are freed up to support customers who are unable to go online and those with more complex enquiries
- Printing and postal costs will be reduced

How will we know we have achieved this?

- 15% annual increase of online transactions
- 10% annual increase of automated online payments
- 40% take up of the 'MyAccount' by March 2022
- 10% annual reduction of postage and printing costs
- 30% reduction of phone and 'in person' contact by March 2022
- 80% of customer enquiries are dealt with at the first point of contact, by March 2022
- 85% customer satisfaction for the service (annually)
- The independent annual assessment on the website confirms its usability and that it meets accessibility standards.

OUR APPROACH

Digital Customer Services

Short term 1-2 years

- Design and implement the Folkestone & Hythe My Account as the main customer transaction route
- Use customer insight from customer surveys and online analytics to review/redesign the top 50 type of enquiries from customers to improve the customer experience and to speed the up overall process time
- Set up customer focus groups (staff, individuals, businesses) to assist in the review/ redesign of services/processes on what the customer needs and not what we think they need (whilst understanding costs and resources)
- Redesign services using the ‘test and learn’ approach
- Implement a new online customer platform to start consolidating customer information from various back office systems
- Reduce the duplication of customer information to have a singular customer record and allow us to focus on being customer centric
- Increase the drive for customers to use online, reducing the need for other channels
- Provide digital services that are so good they become the customers preference

Long term 3-5 years

- Continue to use customer insight/feedback and business intelligence for service improvement
- Redesign services using the ‘test and learn’ approach
- Increase 24/7 service availability by introducing automated artificial intelligence on social media platforms and Webchat to complete processes where appropriate
- Investigate /utilise voice activated services via smart speaker and telephony

Communication and engagement



- Shape channels to provide the optimum customer journey and publicise appropriately
- Ensure optimum customer experience and ensure our services and information are available of channels that suit our customer needs
- Promote new and convenient ways in which customers can access services digitally and clarify exactly which transactions can be completed digitally and the best channel to use for those that aren't
- Report to the customer where they are helping reduce costs by moving to our services through online channels
- Communicate timely with our customers on changes made to our access channels and process

COMMITMENTS

Our commitment to you

- Be professional, helpful and courteous
- Do our best to understand your circumstances
- Protect your personal information
- Take responsibility for your enquiry
- Ensure cost efficient processes
- Deliver what we promise
- Say sorry and put things right if we get them wrong
- Use plain English and explain things clearly
- Continually review our services by listening to our customers
- Respond to your enquiry within a reasonable time

Your commitment to us

- To treat our staff with respect
- Help us to reduce costs by using online services where possible
- Provide constructive feedback on our services so we can continually improve the customer services and experience

