

## Appendix E

# Background Information

## Customer Strategy, Promise and Standards

### 1. Context

**1.1** The Unitary business case sets a vision to *achieve ‘an improved customer experience through new ways of working (including ease of access, efficient processes and digital technology)’* alongside the manifesto’s commitment to *‘listen to Somersets residents so we are open and transparent and making informed decisions.’*

**1.2** Approaches to customer access have been developed independently across the five councils. We recognise that demand for our services is increasing along with the expectations of greater access, ease of use and quality of customer service. So, there is now a need to ensure that, from the outset, the new council sets a vision and plan to meet these demands and expectations.

### 2. Products

**1.1** In response to the commitments, the Customer Strategy for Somerset Council has been developed. It outlines the Council’s strategic vision to put customers at the heart of everything it does and sets out an ambition to deliver increased digital services, alongside a commitment to supporting and enabling those who are unable to self-serve.

**1.2** Complimenting the Strategy are the Customer Promise and Customer Standards which have been developed to ensure customers are clear about what they should expect from the Council when they contact us, through a variety of contact channels.

### 3. Development and Consultation

**1.3** The Customer Strategy, Promise and Standards have been developed within the Customer, Communities and Partnerships workstream and has drawn upon the experiences and best practice of all five Councils.

**1.4** The development team consists of Customer Service Managers and Team Leaders across each authority and regular updates have been shared with the Digital and Website sub-workstreams, as well as colleagues within the Service Alignment workstream to ensure regular feedback was sought and links were

made between other key products, such as the Service Standards and Digital Strategy.

**1.5** An initial audit was conducted of all current strategies, charters, and standards to fully understand the similarities and differences in approaches to customer access across the five authorities.

**1.6** A series of focus groups were undertaken with customers from the new Somerset Council Customer Panel in October and December 2022. A total of 42 customers attended and they were given an overview of the five strategic principles and provided valuable feedback, with changes subsequently made to the products.

**1.7** Internal consultation on developing the draft Customer Strategy, Customer Promise and Customer Standards has been undertaken with:

- Customer, Digital and Website Workstreams – various engagement throughout product development.
- Service Alignment Workstream - various engagement throughout product development.
- Customer, Communities and Partnerships Board – approach endorsed 16/11/2022
- LGR Workstream Workshop – approach endorsed 1/12/2022
- LGR Programme Board – approach endorsed 13/12/2022

#### **4. Customer Strategy**

**1.8** The Customer Strategy sets out our ambitions to develop and deliver an excellent customer experience for our customers. It is important to recognise that customer service should be a Council-wide priority. Whilst we have dedicated customer services teams, acting as the front face of the Council for customers, valuing customer service needs to be embedded in the culture for everyone who works for Somerset Council.

**1.9** The principles within the Customer Strategy have been informed by the Customer Service Excellence standard. This is a framework which is commissioned by the Cabinet Office and tests organisations against areas that research has indicated are a priority for customers, with particular focus on delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism, and staff attitude.

**1.10** The Customer Service Excellence framework has been used by Sedgemoor District Council since 2021 and allows organisations to:

- Continually improve by addressing areas for improvement.
- Allows individuals and teams to explore and acquire new skills in customer service and engagement, building capacity for delivering improved services.
- Provides external validation of achievement, demonstrating competence and celebrating success.

**1.11** In the longer term, the Strategy sets an overall ambition to achieve Customer Service Excellence across the organisation however the initial aim, for the lifetime of this strategy, is to achieve accreditation within our Customer Services teams.

**1.12** Whilst the ambition is to achieve excellence in customer service, there is also a commitment to delivering affordable and value for money services, underpinned by learning from and understanding the needs of our customers. Delivery against this commitment is already evident in the creation of the Customer Panel, which to date has over four hundred members.

**1.13** Informed by the themes and principles set out in the Digital Strategy, there is a focus on developing a 'digital first' culture. Whilst committing to ensuring all our access channels are improved, such as telephone and face-to-face services, our ambition is to deliver quality, easy to use digital services which will be so appealing that they become the channel of preferred choice for our customers.

## **2 Customer Promise and Standards**

**2.1** The purpose of the Customer Promise is to condense the commitments of the Customer Strategy to make it clear for customers as to what they can expect from their experience with us.

**2.2** Complimenting the Customer Promise, the Standards give clear timescales for responses to enquiries across our contact channels, as well as the quality of access and delivery.

**2.3** A comprehensive audit of each of the five authorities' current standards has informed the development of these documents, as well as benchmarking against other local authorities.

- 2.4** Post vesting day, we will begin to have a clearer picture of the needs of our customers and our performance against these initial standards. A review of these products will be conducted in year 1, with our customers.