

Customer Services Strategy 2011-14

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1 Introduction

Following the Comprehensive Spending Review, local authorities are challenged to try to reduce costs without compromising service standards or reducing access or uptake (particularly among more vulnerable or disadvantaged service users). The Government continues to call for public services for all that are efficient, effective, excellent, equitable and empowering – with the customer always at the heart of service provision. Its Customer Service Excellence standard tests those areas that research has indicated are a priority for customers, with particular focus on delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism and staff attitude. There is also emphasis placed on developing customer insight, understanding the user's experience and robust measurement of service satisfaction.

Research recently published by the Institute of Customer Services reported that there is strong evidence that customer service contributes to the success of organisations, with an increasing recognition within the private sector of customer service as a source of competitive advantage and differentiation. The research found that there was no magic ingredient to excelling at customer service but organisations that took part in the research stated repeatedly that success came from getting the basics right such as delivering on time, keeping promises, communicating effectively, correcting mistakes, and streamlining processes to make doing business as easy as possible for the customer. The research also found that success is driven by a clear, organisation wide vision of the importance of customer service.

This document sets out the Customer Services strategy for Cheshire East Council for 2011-2014. It considers how customers can access Council services, what we can do to better understand customer expectations, and how our culture and the behaviours and attitudes of our people is critical to providing customer service excellence. It is anticipated that many of the principles outlined in this strategy will exist beyond that timeframe, but a three year review cycle is appropriate given the constantly increasing customer expectations and rapidly evolving technology landscape driven by innovations in the private sector. The strategy has been developed through a Customer Services Steering group attended by representatives from all areas of the Council.

The purpose of the strategy is to outline the broad principles that drive the development of an efficient and customer focused operating model. These principles may reinforce decisions already taken and implemented, or they will influence service redesign and be implemented through a series of related projects. This strategy is critical in ensuring Cheshire East achieves its corporate objective of *'being an excellent Council'*.

2 Background

The current customer experience for a customer contacting Cheshire East Council is inconsistent, reflecting the varying levels of progress made in harmonising the different services inherited from the legacy authorities and redesigning the service around the needs of the customer. The following SWOT analysis highlights, however, that while there are weaknesses with our current service provision, there are also significant strengths that we have developed in the first two years of Cheshire East. There are also very timely opportunities to leverage and threats to consider. This has encouraged more Council services to actively engage in the development of this strategy.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible telephony platform / virtual contact centre • Cheshire East 'essential numbers' • Usable and accessible website with 3* SOCITM rating providing 24x7x365 access • Modern customer service centres at Macclesfield and Crewe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of standardised end to end processes, e.g. Waste & Recycling • Inconsistent face to face and telephone access depending on where the customer lives • Limited internal and external service standards measurement outside of the customer service centres • Limited integration to line of business systems from the website • No single view of customer; customers regularly have to tell us the same thing several times • Disconnected front line service delivery; limited promotion of related services
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transaction costs per channel : Face to Face £7.40, Telephone £2.90, Web £0.32 (SOCITM Insight Aug 2010) • Extensive library network • % of residents not yet online • Service redesign • Customer insight to connect customer needs • New technologies, e.g. smart phones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pace and ambition of service harmonisation and transformation plans • Staff resistance to change • Customer resistance to channel shift • Media and customers perceive encouraging self service as a reduction in service • Increasing customer expectations

3 Strategy Framework

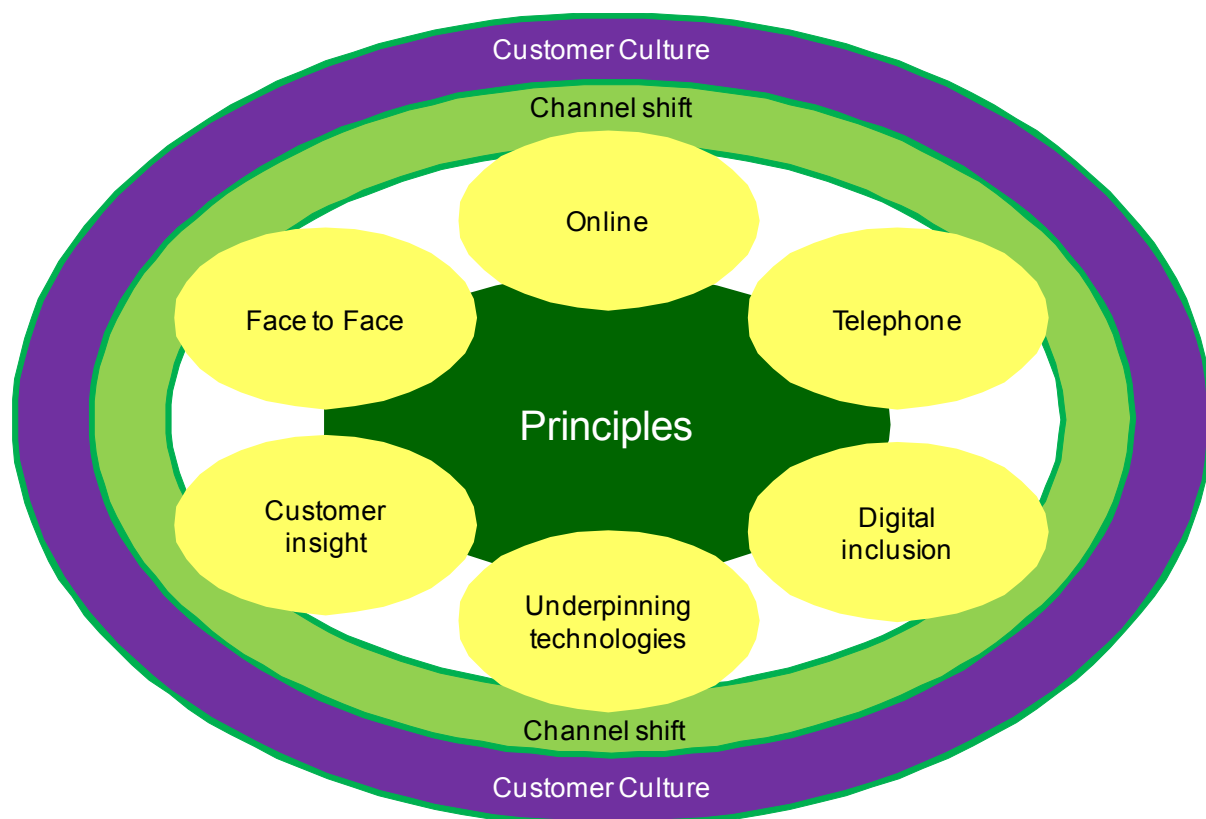
To provide a framework for the development of this Customer Services Strategy, the steering group adapted a model from *Channel Strategy Guidance* published by the Cabinet Office in 2009. The diagram below provides a simple illustration of how different components fit into the Customer Services Strategy, and how they relate to each other.

Principles - The strategic principles used to build the customer services strategy.

The individual elements of the customer services strategy. These include the main access channels for customers, as well as critical enablers and specific communication plans.

Channel shift – the comprehensive drive to encourage customers to access services via channels other than those to which they are accustomed. The launch of the Race Online 2012 by Martha Lane Fox, the UK's Digital Champion, has seen a subtle policy shift from Central Government from providing channel choice to encouraging channel shift and making services digital by default. When 'channel shift' takes place, web enquiries will increase but the marginal cost of servicing these enquiries is almost zero and so many more can be handled at the same cost.

Customer Culture – the values and behaviours embedded within the organisation to put customer needs at the heart of service delivery.



4 Strategic Principles

The strategic principles that underpin this Customer Services Strategy are:

- 1. Provide straightforward, high quality, value for money service through a choice of access channels.**
- 2. Put the needs of the customer and local communities at the heart of service design, and develop more connected service delivery through the intelligent use of customer insight data to anticipate related needs.**
- 3. Increase resolution at first point of contact and reduce avoidable contact caused by service failures, progress chasing and poor communication.**
- 4. Encourage customers to use access channels that are more appropriate to the transaction and cost effective for the Council.**

5 Face to Face Strategy

Some customers prefer to access our services face to face, but this is the most costly access channel for the Council. The key consideration for this element of the strategy was to provide an accessible face to face option for customers wherever they live in the Borough through leveraging existing Council resources within communities such as libraries. The below principles applies to the provision of general customer access to Council services. Solutions to meet a specific need such as Children's Centres or Benefits surgeries and home visits will be considered within the plans of those services.

5.1 Principles

- **Our Customer Service Centres in Crewe and Macclesfield will provide customers with a one stop shop service, including access to specialist staff on an appointment basis (appointments will not be required in emergency situations such as safeguarding incidents).**
- **Libraries, or other community hubs where appropriate, will provide an Information Point service in other locations. The role of these Information Points will be to provide information, signpost and help customers to self serve. Handoffs for more in-depth enquiries will be facilitated through the use of video conferencing technology.**
- **Customers will be directed to direct debit, online, PayPoint and Post Offices for Council tax payments rather than Council premises.**
- **We will review specific 'face to face' only processes, such as concessionary travel, to identify opportunities to provide a choice of channels that are more convenient to the customer and cost effective for the Council.**

5.2 Face to Face Strategy actions in detail:

Ref	Action	Owner	Delivery Date
FF1	Identify communities with a need and a preference for face to face access that do not have a library and identify options to provide customer access in these communities	Customer Services	June 2011
FF2	Review 'face to face' only processes, e.g. concessionary travel, for opportunities to increase channel choice for customers	Customer Services	October 2011
FF3	Complete the roll out of customer access through the remaining Cheshire East libraries	Customer Services / Libraries	September 2012
FF4	Provide a video conferencing solution in community hubs to provide face to face access to specialist resources	Customer Services	September 2012

6 Telephony Strategy

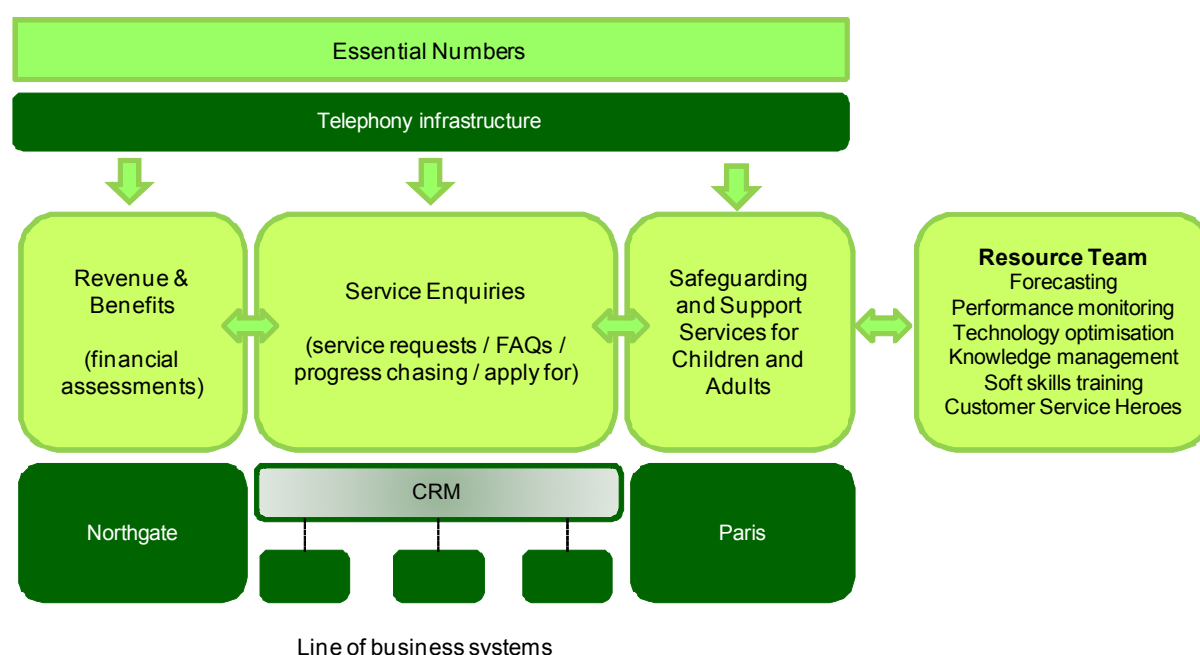
Contact Centres have been proven to be the most efficient way to handle large volumes of telephone calls, but there is a balance that must be considered to ensure that quality is not compromised in the pursuit of maximum efficiencies. The key question that this element of the strategy has addressed is how we will achieve that balance.

This strategy proposes an operating model that consolidates call handling around customer need to achieve the optimum balance between efficiency and effectiveness. The diagram below provides a simple illustration of this operating model.

Customers with individual needs for which we provide individual solutions will be connected directly to specialists who will be trained to assess their needs. Customers and professionals contacting Children and Adults services will be connected to the Safeguarding and Support Team for Children and Adults. This team will facilitate the early intervention and prevention agenda and focus on reablement, whilst ensuring that our most vulnerable Adults and Children receive prompt and timely interventions that address their needs through timely access to multi professional locality teams.

Similarly, customers in financial hardship who contact us seeking advice on Council Tax and Housing benefits will be connected directly to a team of Benefits trained specialists who will be able to assess their eligibility at first point of contact to ensure the prompt set up of appropriate benefits payments.

Customers requiring a standard service will be connected to a general service enquiries team, who will be able initiate service requests, take applications, respond to FAQs and provide progress updates, supported by a single CRM system to ensure process compliance and effective communication with 'back office' services.



All of these teams will be supported by a central Resource team that will monitor performance, forecast customer demand, optimise the technology and provide knowledge and soft skills training.

Some services will continue to receive calls directly where call volumes are generally low and it is a non-standard service that is tailored to the needs of the individual. An example of this is the Housing Options team.

The strategy has also challenged the out of hours service available by telephone, concluding that a locally provided service that deals effectively with emergencies only represents better value for money than a low cost service located outside of Cheshire East that answers all calls made to the Council outside of core opening hours. Customers that call one of the essential numbers outside of core opening hours will be informed that the office is closed. They will be directed to the website if they wish to self-serve, or they will be advised to redial the Social Care Out of Hours team for social care emergencies or our Emergency Control Centre for all other emergencies. Calls to the Emergency Control Centre will be routed to the CCTV room, which is operational 24 x 7. The CCTV room will assess the nature of the call and initiate out of hours escalation procedures as appropriate. This new service replaces the previous out of hours service provided by MessagePad, enabling us to provide local telephone access 24 x 7 x 365 to the customers of Cheshire East.

6.1 Principles

- **Core opening hours for telephone contact are 08.30 to 17.00, Monday to Friday.**
- **Local out of hours service providing emergency response only.**
- **Consolidate call handling around customer need to achieve the optimum balance between efficiency and effectiveness**
 - **Social Care (care needs assessment)**
 - **Benefits (financial needs assessment)**
 - **Service enquiries (service requests / FAQs / progress chasing / apply for)**
- **Provide automated telephone services where appropriate as an option**

6.2 Telephony Strategy actions in detail:

Ref	Action	Owner	Delivery Date
TL1	Standardise Contact Centre opening hours to 08.30 – 17.00, Mon to Fri	Customer Services	April 2011
TL2	Implement local emergency only out of hours service through the CCTV service	Customer Services / Community Safety team	May 2011

Ref	Action	Owner	Delivery Date
TL3	Implement the Safeguarding and Support Services team for Children and Adults	Customer Services / Family Information Service (FIS)	August 2011
TL4	Implement customer relationship management system to create and track general service requests	Customer Services	September 2011
TL5	Complete migration of general service enquiries into the Contact Centre	Customer Services	March 2012

7 Online Strategy

The Cheshire East website consistently receives positive reviews, both from customers through the 'rate this page' function and through independent surveys and mystery shopping. It was recently highlighted as a 'reviewer's favourite' in SOCITM's 2011 survey where it was rated in the top 32% of local authority websites. The reviewer described the website as:

"The strapline '24 hour access to your Council' is achieved with a wide range of online services and a 'Find Nearest' that is rich with information. It feels to me as if this council has really thought about providing information and services. It has got the basics right rather than focusing on techie 'bells and whistles' and prettiness.

I rejoiced in the simplicity of design. People want to find information easily and quickly. Cheshire East website makes this possible."

One of the key considerations for this element of the strategy was the challenge of evolving the website from an information site to a fully transactional site. More and more services can now be requested online, but full integration to back office systems is limited and so requests are often re-keyed and customers must contact us by other channels for progress updates. Our improving website has effectively extended the opening hours of the Council for those wishing to log a service request or find information. To fully empower the customer and improve the overall service proposition, however, the website must become fully transactional with two way integration to back office systems.

Another consideration is the growing use of alternative online channels and tools in providing services to customers. In 2010, 52% of mobile phones sold in the UK were smart phones, and 31% of users accessed the internet via a mobile phone. We need to better understand the types of customers that will access the Council via these alternative online channels and what services they typically use so that we can design a user interface or set of applications that meets the needs and expectations of this group of customers.

7.1 Principles

- **Promote Cheshireeast.gov.uk as the main access point for the Council's services for simple information and transactional services.**
- **Aim to place 100% of our transactional services online.**
- **Provide customers with access to personalised services and confidential information through a secure portal on our website.**
- **Place more of our forms and leaflets online to minimise printing and reduce our environmental impact.**
- **Explore the use of new channels and tools, such as smart phones, Digital TV and social media to reach different customer groups.**

7.2 Online Strategy actions in detail:

Ref	Action	Owner	Delivery Date
ON1	Complete gap analysis and review of transactional services online and prioritise services for implementation	Customer Services	June 2011
ON2	Identify and recommend options for the provision of Council services via smart phones, Digital TV and social media	Customer Services	July 2011
ON3	Develop and implement systems to present information on the website targeted to a location, individual or role	Customer Services	October 2011

8 Digital Inclusion Strategy

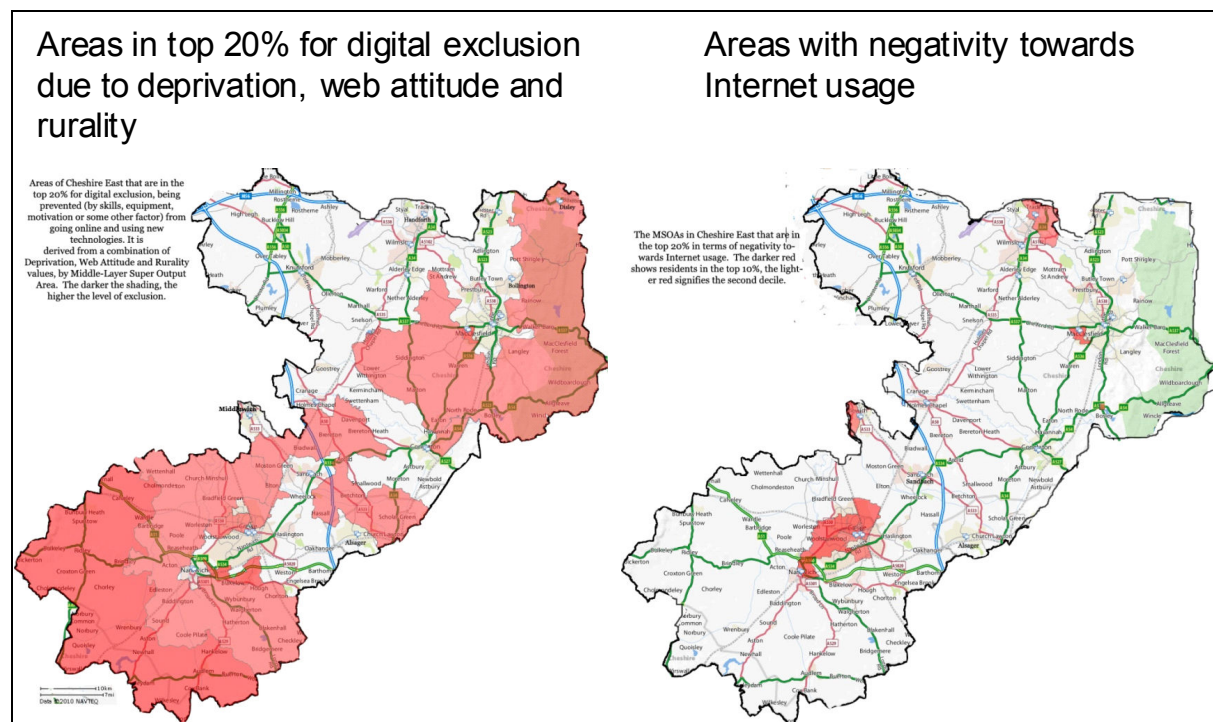
30 million adults in the UK access the internet every day but 9 million have never used the internet. Exclusion from access to digital channels matters for these users as this group includes the socially excluded and hard to reach groups who are likely to have the greatest needs from public services. It also impacts the delivery of efficient public services, because when people cannot access services online they use alternative channels that are generally more expensive.

In her *Manifesto for a Networked Nation* published in July 2010, Martha Lane Fox, the UK Digital Champion, has set out the ambitions for all organisations that deliver or benefit from digital services:

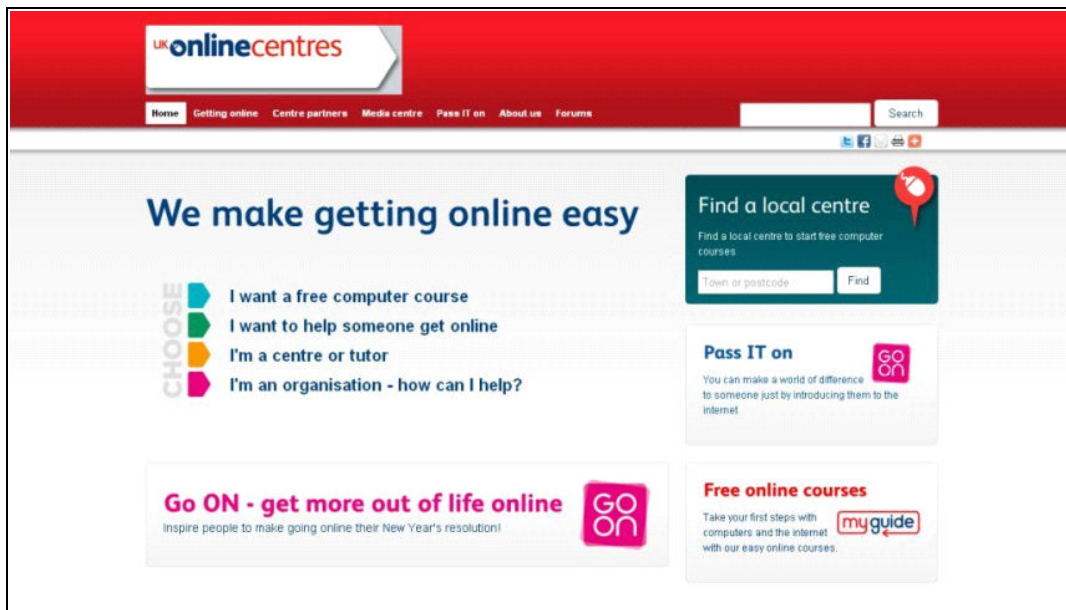
"We need to be ambitious, think 'internet first' when we design services, and put the needs of the hardest to reach at the heart of industry, charity and government. There is a social and moral case to make sure more people are online but there is a clear economic case too. We will all be better off when everyone is online."

Leaders at every level of industry, government and the charitable sector should embed manifesto challenges into corporate plans and make Race Online 2012 pledges by the end of 2010.

Government should expect people of working age to use some key online services and signpost those who need help to web access and training points. People must know where they can find local web access and/or training points and where they can go to get assistance with online public services, supported by local digital champions in every community.



The map on the left above highlights areas of Cheshire East in the top 20% for digital exclusion, being prevented (by skills, equipment, motivation or some other factor) from going online and using new technologies. The map on the right highlights areas in Cheshire East that are in the top 20% in terms of negativity towards internet usage. We can conclude from these two maps that the majority of Cheshire East residents that are not excluded from accessing digital channels due to a negative attitude or resistance to online services, but most likely due to lack of equipment, access to good quality broadband or lack of training.



The UK online centres network was set up by government in 2000 to provide people with free or low cost access to computers and the internet, as well as the help and support they need to use them. Many different organisations make up the UK online centres network. Some are privately owned, others are based in the voluntary or community sector. They include libraries, Surestart centres, Housing Associations, Age UK centres, individual community centres and schools. All Cheshire East libraries are already designated online centres. The public sector has a responsibility to help people who do not (yet) have access to or the skills or confidence to use digital services, particularly if public services in the future are going to be 'digital by default'.

8.1 Principles

- **Commit to the Race Online 2012 and help 2,000 Cheshire East residents get online by the London 2012 Olympic Games.**
- **Identify and promote UK online centres throughout Cheshire East to make it easy to get online through our libraries and community partners.**
- **Explore the opportunity to provide Wi-Fi access in our online centres and other community hubs.**
- **Develop a mobile online solution to reach those customers that may not access the internet through a PC but regularly use the internet through their mobile phone.**

8.2 Digital Inclusion Strategy actions in detail:

Ref	Action	Owner	Delivery Date
DIN1	Sign up for the Race Online 2012 and pledge to help 2,000 residents of Cheshire East get online	Libraries	May 2011
DIN2	Develop a Digital Inclusion campaign to promote the libraries as UK online centres and encourage volunteers and residents to support and participate in training	Libraries	June 2011
DIN3	Undertake a feasibility study to provide Wi-Fi access in libraries	ICT Strategy	June 2011
DIN4	Identify alternative online centres in communities that do not have a library	Customer Services	October 2011

9 Customer Insight

Successful organisations with reputations for outstanding customer service recognise they need to step away from their own beliefs about what customers value and find out what their customers actually think is important. Using customer insight to drive service redesign or simple front-line process improvements will ensure that we provide services that our customers consider value for money. This insight may come from focus groups, structured surveys, customer complaints and suggestions, mystery shopping or even simple unprompted feedback via the website.

The Council provides a broad range of services, and customers often have to contact more than one department when they go through a significant life event such as starting school or moving into the area. One of the biggest opportunities to improve the way customers perceive how easy the Council is to do business with is to connect our services and promote relevant related services when a customer contacts us.

9.1 Principles

- **Develop campaigns to connect services and promote related needs when a customer contacts us, e.g. checking whether a customer has an assisted lift for their bins when they apply for a blue badge.**
- **Use the Citizen's Panel to test reaction to proposed changes to the customer experience and influence service redesign.**
- **Measure the customer experience through customer satisfaction surveys, mystery shopping and customer complaints, compliments and suggestions across all access channels.**

9.2 Customer Insight actions in detail:

Ref	Action	Owner	Delivery Date
CIN1	Introduce customer satisfaction call backs	Customer Services	October 2011
CIN2	Develop a strategy for promoting related needs to customers when they contact us via telephone, face to face and online to ensure we capture information from a customer once and use it many times	Customer Services	March 2012

10 Underpinning Technologies

Technology plays a critical role in enabling the delivery of an efficient and effective customer experience. The development of this strategy has identified some key technology enablers that could significantly improve the customer experience across a number of services.

A data warehouse that enables data matching and cleansing between the various customer databases across the Council and provides a single view of the customer will enable us to deliver a more connected customer experience and remove the need for customers to contact us many times to give us the same information. It will also drive efficiency through eliminating multiple entry of the same data.

Many of our services are delivered by field based crews who are effectively out of communication during much of the working day. Any progress updates or issues are not communicated to our customer interface until the end of the working day. Customers often contact us during the day to report issues, such as missed waste collections, while the crews are in the field and we have to call them back the next day once the updates from the crews are available. Many organisations have now deployed mobile communication devices to deliver automated flow of information between the Contact Centre (and website) and the “crews on the ground” enabling real-time status updates and tracking and improved work allocation. Investing in this capability will help to reduce avoidable contact.

High speed broadband connectivity across Cheshire East is essential to provide all customers with access to our digital services. Providing broadband to rural areas is a particular challenge in Cheshire East. This strategy supports the need for continued investment in rural broadband access.

10.1 Principles

- **Provide a single view of the customer to remove the need for the customer to tell us the same information more than once – gather information once and use it many times to eliminate multiple entry of data.**
- **Provide real-time service data at the customer interface, e.g. Waste crews reporting bins that are not put out or where there is obstructed access through handheld or in-cab devices.**
- **Ensure there is good broadband access in all Cheshire East communities.**

10.2 Underpinning Technologies actions in detail:

Ref	Action	Owner	Delivery Date
UT1	Implement the master customer index to initially connect the CRM and Council Tax databases and create the foundations for the Cheshire East customer hub	ICT	October 2011

Ref	Action	Owner	Delivery Date
UT2	Develop technical proof of concept for mobile working device (PDAs) for field based workforce	ICT	March 2012
UT3	Work with communities to understand the demand for better broadband and with telecommunications suppliers to further their investment in broadband within Cheshire East	ICT	March 2012
UT4	Bid for Public Sector gap funding to ensure all areas of Cheshire East have access to high capacity, reliable broadband services	ICT	April 2012

11 Customer Culture

Culture is the combination of values, beliefs and norms that provide direction and energy to what people do each day...or put another way, who and what's important around here? It drives the attitudes and behaviours of our people on the front-line with the customer.

Customers will remember and talk about their experiences with Cheshire East based on their interactions with our people and the impression they leave on them. We can have effective processes and technologies, but these are meaningless without people that can engage with the customer and understand what they really need from us. On the flip side, sometimes our processes and technologies let us down, and how we handle these difficult interactions with the customer can still make it a positive and memorable experience for the customer.

We want our customers to describe Cheshire East as:

- Simple to do business with
- Connected and joined up
- Get it right first time at first point of contact
- Have an attitude of helpfulness
- Proactive, professional and positive

Organisational culture can either help or hinder the delivery of a great customer experience consistently across all access channels. The four cultural building blocks, in the table below summarise how a strong customer focus should be embedded in all that we do, and have been used to develop the principles and priorities for action to develop a customer focused culture in Cheshire East.

Communication	Capability
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Customer focused vision and values• Words and actions mirror our vision• Consistent messages & stories• Aligned business processes & management rituals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Link between strategy and execution• Develop technical and soft skills• Consider everyone• Get it right in recruitment
Connectedness	Commitment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Systems thinking – understand linkages• Customer check - policies, processes, and procedures• Clarify risk tolerance and penalties• Monitor cause and effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What gets measured / recognised / rewarded gets done• Seek, share and use feedback from customers and staff• Benchmark, monitor and celebrate success• Make “the customer” our number one priority

11.1 Principles

- Define the customer value proposition for every service.
- Make explicit and embed 'customer' in our service, planning and performance reporting processes.
- Embed 'customer focus' within our values, competency frameworks, and reward and recognition schemes.
- Develop our workforce to equip and empower them to deliver customer service excellence

11.2 Customer Culture actions in detail:

Ref	Action	Owner	Delivery Date
CUL1	Add the Customer Service Excellence training programme to the Corporate Training Directory to make it available to all services	Organisational Development	May 2011
CUL2	Develop strategic customer measures and targets within the corporate balanced scorecard performance reports	Performance & Partnerships	June 2011
CUL3	Review and challenge service plans to embed customer measures across all services	Performance & Partnerships	June 2011
CUL4	Commission an internal staff survey to understand where we think we are now to provide a baseline from which we can measure progress	Customer Services	June 2011
CUL5	Commission proof of concept to review and define the customer value proposition for a service(s) (see Appendix 1 for proposed scope of the proof of concept)	Corporate Improvement / Customer Services	September 2011
CUL6	Make customer focus explicit within aspire values and behavioural competency framework	Organisational Development	January 2012
CUL7	Develop and launch a recognition scheme to recognise individual customer service heroes	Organisational Development	January 2012
CUL8	Develop an e-learning module for the Employee Induction programme to provide an overview of the range of services the Council provides to help staff make the connections	Organisational Development	Mar 2012