

CABINET

Report Title	Embedding a New Customer Focus – Adoption of Customer Experience Strategy
Date of Meeting	Wednesday, 7 May 2025
Report Author	Clair Norton
Lead Officer	Assistant Chief Executive
Lead Cabinet Member(s)	Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources and Deputy Leader
Why is this a key decision?	<div>1. Expenditure over £1 Million+ no</div> <div>2. Significant impact on 2 or more wards no</div>
Wards Affected	(All Wards);
Identify exempt information and exemption category	Choose an item.
Is the report urgent?	No
Reasons for urgency (only where applicable)	
Appendices (if any)	1. Customer Experience Strategy 2025 - 2028

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report presents the first Customer Experience Strategy for Sandwell, covering the period from 2025 -2028.
- 1.2 The Strategy sets out the authority's plans to achieve its vision of providing excellent customer service, to all our residents, staff, businesses, partners, visitors and community groups, working with all customers to ensure that its services meet their needs and are inclusive and accessible for all.
- 1.3 The Strategy aligns with the Council Plan 2024-2027, Vision 2030, underpins the authority's Values and Behaviours compact and will complement the forthcoming Data Strategy and Digital Strategy for Sandwell.

2. Recommendations

The Cabinet is recommended to:-

- 2.1 Approve the Customer Experience Strategy 2025 – 2028 as set out in Appendix 1.
- 2.2 That in connection with 2.1 above, authorise the Assistant Chief Executive to approve the implementation of the Customer Experience Strategy across the council.

3. Proposals – Reasons for the recommendations

- 3.1 Improving customer experience of the Council is a key area of focus for Sandwell. A wide-ranging programme of work is already in place to ensure interactions with customers are of a consistently high standard and a customer-focused approach is at the heart of everything the Council does.
- 3.2 The strategy sets the direction for how the Council employees will interact with customers and colleagues, as well as emphasising the importance of council values and behaviours and ensuring the authority achieves its aim to put the customer at the heart of everything it does.

3.3 Background and Drivers

- 3.4 The Council has made good progress over the last three years to improve its approach to customer service and this new strategy is intended to provide a framework for the continued development of the authority's customer focus in the years ahead. It supplements the existing values and behaviours and aims to formalise the vision and commitments that the Council has for its customer experience and to continuous improvement. The strategy sets out how the council will optimise the experience of customers when they contact the council to get help or get something done in their home or neighbourhood, by using its resources in a coordinated way so their specific needs are met in the most efficient, modern and effective way possible.
- 3.5 The Council's vision is to provide excellent customer service, to all residents, staff, businesses, partners, visitors and community groups. It will work with all customers to ensure that services meet their needs and are inclusive and accessible for all.
- 3.6 Excellent local authorities actively demonstrate a One Team approach to serving customers and communities. The Council's ambition is to be an outstanding council and be recognised as such. Having adopted the Customer Focus and One Team Values, there is a need to set out a Customer Experience Strategy for the organisation that ensures high consistency in service delivery and experience, resolving as many customer queries at the first point of contact and ensuring efficiency in our approach. The commitment

made in this strategy is to put **customers first**. The Council is committed to providing high-quality modern customer service that is accessible to everyone who lives in or visits Sandwell.

3.7 The Strategy will provide clarity on our offer aligned to the Customer Focus through five new principles:

1. We will deliver a customer focussed culture within our organisation.
2. We will provide an excellent and consistent customer services
3. We will focus on digital customer services but always create inclusive, accessible services that meet the changing needs of our customers.
4. We will listen, learn and improve our services based on our Customer Feedback
5. We will provide value for money services that balance the needs of our vulnerable service users within the resources available to us

These principles are expanded on within the full Strategy document. The Council would monitor its effectiveness via customer feedback and data monitoring.

3.8 The Strategy is the renewal of our ongoing commitment to meaningfully listen to residents, constantly adapting how they can connect with us and delivering industry leading customer experiences in a modern, efficient & sustainable way and clearly identifies:

- Our overall aims.
- The actions we will take to meet those aims.
- Our Customer Commitments.
- How we will know if this strategy is making a difference.
- Our timeline.

4 Alternative Options Considered

4.1 The Council has the option of not adopting a Customer Experience Strategy and continuing to operate without a strategic focus on the needs of customers. However, as one of the organisation's priorities is to provide a high-quality customer experience, this is not recommended.

5. Consultation

5.1 The strategy has been written taking into account existing data and intelligence captured from customers. As this is the first Customer Experience Strategy for Sandwell, consultation will be undertaken at the end of 2025 (Year 1) to further inform the strategy and to measure the impact.

5.2 The strategy has been informed by resident survey data from 2024 which indicates:

- 64% of those interviewed trust the Council a great deal/fair amount (national benchmark 53%)
- 20% of those interviewed had contacted the council in the last 3 months – most contacts were housing queries or missed bins
- 56% of residents thought the Council acted on the concerns of local residents (national benchmark 47%)
- 65% of residents interviewed were satisfied with how Sandwell Council run things (national benchmark 55%)

- 5.3 The strategy incorporates lessons learned from Customer Satisfaction data, which is captured through existing contact channels, such as MySandwell, and the Contact Centre as well as the face-to-face feedback from the Community Hub Pilot and the One Stop Shop. This feedback captures the reasons that some customers require a face-to-face service, as well as first point of contact failure data.
- 5.4 In 2022, the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board reviewed the experience of Sandwell residents when accessing or requesting Council services, to review and to identify, if deemed necessary, any outstanding issues with the Council's customer-focused services. The development of a Customer Experience Strategy was included in the recommendations from the Board.
- 5.5 Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group have also made recommendations around customer experience, for example to move towards one main contact number for all Council Services which has been incorporated into the new telephony system scheduled to go live in 2025. All other recommendations have also been taken into account.
- 5.6 Customer Access trends show customers over time choosing to use online services for transactional service requests, with a consistent decline in the proportion of contact away from telephone and face to face contact. For the year 2023/24 there were:
- Over 830,000 contacts online through MySandwell
 - Over 55,000 contacts in person
 - 7,166,591 hits on the website
 - Over 528,000 contacts via telephone
- 5.7 Drop in consultation sessions were held for both internal staff and stakeholders and externally with members of the public, advertised within the Sandwell Herald. Feedback received has informed the direction of the Strategy.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1 There are no direct budgetary implications associated with the strategy. The expectation is that any budgetary implications that arise from actions will be managed within existing service area budgets.
- 6.2 This strategy will support the council to achieve the savings identified in the MTFS associated with Customer service areas. The budget position for all local authorities, and a change in customer behaviours and expectations, are two key drivers creating a renewed focus for councils to improve customer experience and access to services, with the knowledge that by getting it right for the customer first time, can in turn, reap efficiencies.

7. Legal and Governance Implications

- 7.1 The implementation of the strategy complies with all relevant regulations.
- 7.2 Data protection measures will align with UK GDPR and information governance standards.
- 7.3 The Assistant Chief Executive and Strategic Improvement Manager for Corporate Customer will oversee implementation, ensuring accountability and alignment across the Council.

8. Risks

- 8.1 Digital inclusion – Digital literacy training, accessible technology, and targeted resident support programmes
- 8.2 Workforce resistance – Targeted learning and development including bespoke training, ongoing professional development programs and continued value and behaviour awareness.
- 8.3 Data Security Risks – Compliance with GDPR and cybersecurity measures,

9. Equality and Diversity Implications (including the public sector equality duty)

- 9.1 The development of the strategy will have a positive impact on equality, diversity, and inclusion for people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 and more widely. This is because the plan will take a data driven approach to understand the needs of the council's customers better and equip employees with relevant training. The plan also sets out to better understand the various channels different groups need to access our services and where the council can automate in some areas to spend more time on complex matters that require face to face or phone calls, so no one is digitally excluded.

- 9.2 As the strategy is put into action, the council will ensure people from different backgrounds, languages and access needs can make contact easily and feed into this work. Therefore, this strategy does not have any negative impacts on equalities.

10. Other Relevant Implications

- 10.1 **Climate change** – The action plan may have a positive impact on sustainability as there is a more appropriate and considered use of physical and digital resources when contacting customers which might support less resource wastage. There is also the potential that, through linking this work with strategies such as digital inclusion, the council can support the use of reusable technology. Finally, through improving customer interactions, for example through better partnership working, the council can work more effectively to complete sustainability initiatives as set out in the council plan
- 10.2 **ICT / digital implications** – The delivery of this strategy will be dependent and informed by key workstreams for ICT and Digital. The emerging Data and Digital Strategies will need to align with this document and will inform the approach to Customer Service Transformation, which will focus largely on channel shift and the potential for increased use of automation and AI solutions.

11. Background Documents

- Council Plan 2024 – 2027
- Sandwell Vision 2030

12. How does this deliver the objectives of the Strategic Themes?

Customer Service underpins everything that the Council does as a provider of public services to the people of Sandwell. This strategy is intended to establish and embed a corporate and consistent approach to Customer Service, which is a key priority for the authority.

Relevance Check

Budget Reduction/Service Area:

Service Lead

Date:

In what ways does this Budget reduction have an impact on an outward facing service? How will the service feel different to your customers or potential customers?

N/A

If not, how does it impact on staff e.g. redundancies, pay grades, working conditions? Why are you confident that these staff changes will not affect the service that you provide?

N/A

Is a Customer Impact Assessment needed? No

.