Hackney Council’s Customer Service Strategy 2016-2019

“Hackney at the touch of a button”
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The way most people do business and communicate is changing rapidly.

We use cash less and pay by card more, we go to the shops less and order things online more, we write letters less and use email more. Many of us contact organisations through social media now, rather than give them a call, email or visit in person. And, increasingly, we’re doing all these things from just one device, be it a smartphone, laptop or tablet.

Why? Because these new ways of doing business are more convenient, faster and cheaper than the old ways.

Hackney Council, like other councils and central government, has made more and more of its services available over the internet, and this move to online will continue. Most people find it more convenient to get information or to access services in this way. For those who find this difficult, we will provide as much help as we can to get them online or ensure they can continue to access services in other ways, and there will always be face-to-face or telephone support for those who really need it.

The new ways of doing business also save us money, which is now more important than ever. We have far less to spend than we had a few years ago. Hackney has been very successful in maintaining front-line services while Government funding has been falling these past five years. We have done this by working more efficiently, often by increasing the use of computers and other electronic equipment. However, there are more years of Government funding cuts ahead and we need to keep striving to make the most of every pound we get.

Every time you access Council services online you are helping us save the money we need to maintain the public services on which thousands of people rely and enjoy every day.

This Customer Services Strategy is based on two overarching principles – ‘getting it right first time’ and making ‘more services available at more times’. Everything we do needs to feed into one of these principles.

And these next three years are not just about increasing what we offer online. We’re going to improve our processes, listen to you more, train our staff better, work smarter with our partners and make sure compassion, discretion and common sense underpins everything we do.
Where we are now
Since our last Customer Service Strategy was published in 2010, a lot has changed in how we provide customer services in Hackney. Throughout the past five years we’ve listened to your opinions and strived to improve the way we work to meet your needs. Examples of new services we’ve rolled out, based on your feedback, include:

- **The One Account** where you can access a range of services online
- An easy-to-use online parking services system
- Text messages to remind you about Council Tax payments
- Reporting housing repairs online

### The Hackney Service Centre

One of the biggest changes is the Hackney Service Centre, which opened in 2010 on Hillman Street, directly behind Hackney Town Hall. This one-stop-shop for a wide range of services has been used hundreds of thousands of times, being visited by 162,358 customers in 2015/16 alone.

People can now register their baby’s birth; book their wedding; get expert advice on housing, Council Tax, benefits or disabled parking; use a computer in private to access the internet; and a host of other services, all in one place. And, despite getting busier, average waiting times have fallen from 25 minutes to 15.

### Over the phone

We’ve improved what we can offer on the phone too. Our contact centre can now be used to report anti-social behaviour or an abandoned vehicle; order a recycling bag; receive advice about events going on in the borough; renew a library book; make a bid on a housing application; or make a payment for Council services. In 2015/16 we dealt with 634,523 calls. There’s also an out-of-hour’s telephone service so that you can contact us at any time when you have an emergency need.
The move to online

Perhaps most importantly though are the amount of services we now offer online for people to access on their smartphone, tablet or computer.

We’ve launched the One Account, a new secure log-in system which remembers your personal information and service history. Here, people can access a range of services, including paying their Council Tax, making a benefits claim, requesting housing repairs and accessing landlord services.

Our new online parking services system makes buying a permit, applying for a visitor voucher or ordering a Blue Badge much easier and means people don’t need to travel to our offices.

Because supporting people to be healthy and independent is so important, we have introduced iCare. This online source of information on health, social care and wellbeing is supported by a range of local organisations and charities to help people find out about the opportunities and services available to them.

We have a new, easier to use website where people can find out about and pay for services with just a couple of clicks, and the Love Clean Hackney mobile phone app where you can report fly-tipping, potholes, graffiti and dog fouling.

To support our focus on encouraging people to go online, we’ve introduced a computer hub in the Service Centre for people who don’t have easy access to the internet. To help those who had little to no experience on the internet, our team of Digital Champions are on hand to offer training and advice.

Increased satisfaction

A survey of Hackney residents, carried out last year by Mori, found 70% were satisfied or very satisfied with how the Council was doing things. Ten years ago this was 52%, and five years before that it was just 23%, so we are delighted to see that you are noticing our improvements and hard work. When asked to compare 2015 with 2013, 74% of people felt Council services had got better or stayed the same, compared to just 12% who felt they had got worse.

It’s great to see this continued record of improvement, especially in such financially challenging times, but we know there’s more we can do.
Times are Changing
The need to save money

From 2010/11 to 2015/16, we had our Government funding cut by £100m. Over the same period, we had to find an extra £30m to cover rising costs and increased demand for services. We’ve worked hard to be more efficient and innovative to manage this £130m shortfall without affecting the services you have told us are important to you.

However, over the period 2016/17 to 2019/20 the Government will be cutting Hackney’s grant by another £38m, and we predict £20m in rising costs and demand on top of this. There will be difficult decisions ahead as we try to manage this further £58m funding gap, and we need to try harder than ever to make the most of every pound we get.

One of the best ways we can save money is by encouraging more people to access our services and information online. It’s been calculated that the average cost to the Council of a face-to-face transaction is £14, and it’s £5 per phone call. This compares to just 17p if it’s carried out online. Fortunately, we know more and more people want to do business online, we just need to make sure that we make it as easy and effective as possible. Of course, there will be those for whom accessing services and advice online is not what’s best for them, and they will continue to get the support they need.

Universal Credit

Universal Credit is a new means-tested, single monthly payment for people of ‘working age’ –16 to 64 years. It merges together and replaces Income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit and Housing Benefit. It’s estimated that 34,000 families and households in Hackney will be moved onto this new system by 2022, and the Government wants all claims to be processed online. This means Hackney Council will no longer pay Housing Benefit to those of you who are of ‘working age’. Universal Credit does not affect older people entitled to a pension.
Hackney Council’s Customer Service Strategy

• improve how it works on smartphones and tablets.
• A new contact centre system which can use text message, web chat and Instant Messenger, as well as voice and email.
• Use social media more effectively as a way of responding to questions and addressing complaints.
• A further improved parking portal so people can apply for virtual parking vouchers and permits via the web.
• Explore the use of QR codes or bar codes for invoices to make it easier for payments to be made at banks, post offices etc.
• Invest in ways to contact our customers by text, eg to remind you of appointments and payment dates, but also for fun community events so you don’t miss out!
• levels and targets that need to be achieved by all.

Our Charter explains what customers can expect when they make contact with us:

• We will be helpful, compassionate and responsive to customer needs, always aiming to get it right the first time
• If things go wrong we will listen, take responsibility and put it right
• We will consult and use our customer feedback to improve services
• We will use plain English in all our correspondence and offer a translation service when required
• We will support customers to access services online and ensure help is available for those who cannot use the internet
• Our Customer Service staff are accountable, and will give their name and wear identification badges
• Common sense, common sense, common sense or common sense over process and bureaucracy

Helpful websites and phone numbers

Eg. www.hackney.gov.uk
www.hackneyicare.org.uk
Out-of-hours telephone service

The next three years
Our ambition and strategy

Our ambition over the next three years is to continue improving our customer services while reducing what it costs to provide them. Our strategy to achieve this is based on two principles:

**Getting it right first time** – whether that be in person, over the phone or online. Not only does this mean less frustration for you, avoiding unnecessary contact saves staff time and the Council money.

**More services available at more times** – this could be through smarter use of buildings, better working with partner organisations or increasing what’s available online. As well as being easier and more convenient for people, online services can be accessed 24/7.

Serving these two core principles are seven themes, under which we have laid out our plans for improvement.

And, don’t worry, though focusing our efforts online is essential, we know many people don’t feel comfortable and confident using a smartphone or computer. We are investing in training and facilities to help more people get online and understand how things work, and there will always be face-to-face or telephone support for those who really need it.

### The seven themes

#### 1. Know, listen to and respond to our customers

Hackney is a wonderfully diverse place. We know that to engage as many residents as possible, we must understand that different people have different needs, and access information differently.

We will continue to listen to our customers and use the complaints you make and compliments you give (thank you!) to understand what we can do better. We will then act on this.

**What we are going to do:**
- Conduct regular surveys to ask customers what they think of our services, what we could do better and what else they might need.
- Use equalities information available to the Council and hold focus groups with residents to identify and overcome barriers for accessing services.
- Use social media data to learn more about our customers’ needs and experiences and shape future services for the better.
- Seek customer feedback through mystery shopping, comment cards, and complaints data.
2. New approaches and processes

We’re always looking at ways to offer more services and improve how we do things.

**What we are going to do:**
- Consider how we use our buildings across the borough to see if we could improve efficiency and our customer experience.
- Make sure the buildings we use are easily accessible for all our residents.
- Develop a new payments system so people who have outgoings from different parts of the Council can pay them all as one Direct Debit.
- Look to extend the police advisory service, which currently operates from the Hackney Service Centre two days a week.
- Further develop and promote the public information points in our libraries so more people can easily access our free online services nearer where they live.
- Look at ways of providing more computer hubs across Hackney to make it easier for more residents to get online.
- Floor walkers with iPads in the Service Centre to help people while they wait

3. Technology

People have told us they want to easily access Council services at any time, in the same way they access a range of other services 24/7. Making the most of new and existing technology will enable us to do this.

**What we are going to do:**
- Expand the number of services available through the One Account, such as registering births, deaths and marriages, accessing adult services, booking appointments, business services and, when it is launched, Universal Credit.
• Make more registrar’s applications available online.
• Continue to develop our new website so people can access even more services and information, and improve how it works on smartphones and tablets.
• Expand the contact centre system which will use text message, web chat and Instant Messenger, as well as voice and email.
• A further improved parking portal so people can apply for virtual parking vouchers and permits via the web.
• Explore the use of QR codes or bar codes for invoices to make it easier for payments to be made at banks, post offices etc.
• Invest in ways to contact our customers by text, eg to remind you of appointments, service changes and payment dates, but also for fun community events so you don’t miss out!

4. Partnerships

We are not the only organisation that people need to contact to get what they need in Hackney. By working closely with our other partners, such as local disability and mental health charities, City and Hackney Safeguarding Children’s Board, City and Hackney CCG, the Hackney Learning Trust and the police, we will make it easier for people to access what they need.

What we are going to do:
• Sensibly group services together, wherever possible, in town centre locations with good access to public transport.
• Shared use of buildings to bring together staff and services from different organisations so people get a joined up service.

5. Our staff

At the heart of both providing and improving our customer services are our dedicated staff.

What we are going to do:
• Invest in the skills of our staff, so they are better able to design and deliver effective, more user-friendly access to services and information.
• Roll out our existing Customer Service Excellence training course to more Council staff, so we all know what good service looks like.
• Review how we organise our customer services department, to make sure we work in a way that makes accessing us easier for residents.
• Ensure that staff are up to date with new developments across the Council so they can provide people with the best information.
• Establish a clearer set of roles and responsibilities for our customer service teams, and the teams of people who support them behind the scenes, and tie into performance levels and targets to be achieved by all.
6. Communicating

We want to increase the variety of ways we communicate so everyone knows what we do, how we can help, and how to contact us.

What we are going to do:

- Continue striving to make information and processes on our website more simple and easy to understand.
- Better use of communication materials such as banners, posters, plasma screens and leaflets to promote and explain new services, improvements or changes.
- E-newsletters tailored to people’s interests to promote services and opportunities.
- More use of social media to keep people informed about services, and enable direct communication between customers and staff so we can advise and address issues quickly.

7. Standards and targets

We will deliver services in accordance with a clear set of performance standards and enforce procedures put in place to ensure they are met. Organisations contracted to work on our behalf must offer an equally high standard of customer service. We will take action if they don’t.

What we are going to do:

- Continue to answer telephone calls as quickly as possible and keep meeting our target of five rings.
- Aim to have visitors to the Service Centre waiting no longer than an average of 15 minutes to see someone who can help.
- Establish a group of senior managers to coordinate and monitor the delivery of the Customer Services Strategy. This Customer Services Board will report progress to Hackney’s Management Team.
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- Common sense and discretion over bureaucracy and process
- We will consult and use our customer feedback to improve services
- We will use plain English in all our correspondence and offer a translation service when required
- We will support customers to access services online and ensure help is available for those who cannot use the internet
- Our Customer Service staff are accountable, and will give their name and wear identification badges