



# Customer Strategy 2016 - 2020

*Living the Brand*



**Open**  
**Honest**  
**Approachable**  
**Keeping our promises**

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## **Foreword by Councillor Diccio**

Cabinet Member for Stronger Communities and Partnerships

I am delighted to be able to bring you Solihull Council's Customer Strategy which sets out how we are going to deliver and improve access to advice, information and services for customers across the Borough. This strategy builds on the foundations created over the last 15 years since Solihull Connect, the Council's customer service brand, was created and recognises that customer contact happens throughout the Council, significantly in Libraries and Council building receptions.

Solihull Connect already provides customers with advice, information and access to services by providing walk in centres, a telephone and email contact centre, social media channels and a range of digital access channels including our website. In improving and extending access to services we are mindful of the need to provide value for money services and maximise digital opportunities.

Solihull Council's ambition to be 'great' drives our commitment to provide great customer services. Our staff are open, honest, approachable and keep their promises to customers demonstrating the behaviours and values that we believe are important in achieving our ambition. This strategy describes how customer services will contribute to the Council's key priorities so that we can achieve our ambition.

## 1. Vision

Customers who are able to easily access the advice, information and services they need to help them live a better life.

## 2. Objectives

The objectives of the strategy are that customers can say:

- I am listened to and my feedback helps improve services.
- The people that I contact treat me as an individual and are focussed on my needs.
- I am provided with appropriate access and support to enable me to use digital access channels.
- There is no wrong front door and I only tell my story once.
- I am provided with a responsive and value for money contact service.

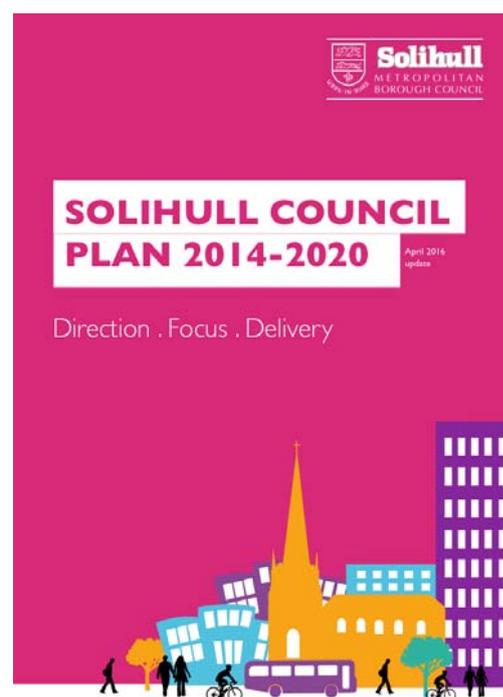
## 3. Purpose

The purpose of the Customer Strategy is to provide direction and clarity about how the Council plans to enable customers to interact with it. 'Customers' include people who live in, work in or visit the Metropolitan Borough of Solihull either virtually or in person.

Our aspiration for customers is that they are treated as individuals and are able to access advice, information and services in an easy and cost effective way recognising that some customers will need support to access services and others will feel able to access services themselves.

Customers access a range of council services via a number of different access channels as well as visiting Libraries and Council building receptions for information and advice. Some customers will receive contact from officers who may visit them in their homes and others may contact the Council via the internet to seek information and do not need to speak to a person at all.

This strategy will provide direction to the Council and support the delivery of services to customers in a way which ensures that services are designed and delivered to meet their needs whilst providing value for money. The outcome of the strategy will be to improve service delivery through efficient processes and improved customer service delivered in line with the Council's; vision, ambition and priorities included in the Solihull Council Plan.



## Background

The way that customers want to access information and services has changed significantly in recent years with the increased use of digital means of communication and emergence, popularity and convenience of mobile technology. Analysis of contact channels over the last 2 years for which we have comparable data shows this transition.

Access channel	2014	2015	% change
Face to face visits to Solihull Connect walk in service	122498	104374	14.7% decrease
Telephone calls to Solihull Connect Contact Centre	276674	257464	6.9% decrease
Emails, webforms and live chats* handled by Solihull Connect Contact Centre	17506	18760	15% increase

\*NB Live chat was implemented in 2015

This move towards self service also provides the Council with an opportunity to provide better value for money. Whilst self service access requires investment it can also provide savings.

Promoting self service access channels is a key element of the Council's Digital Strategy. The Digital Strategy refers to 3 key areas:

- Infrastructure – putting the right digital related technology in place and ensuring that it is reliable.
- Inclusion – providing appropriate training and support to enable digital technology to be used.
- Customer experience - the look, feel and usability of online services and self service facilities needs to make customers feel that it was easy, safe, reliable and that they would want to access information and services using that method again.



Although we want to move towards self service channels we also recognise the need to provide appropriate access channels for more complex enquiries and for vulnerable customers who need additional support including telephone and face to face access both of which will continue to be available.

The Council Plan sets our direction of travel and lists the key programmes that we will be delivering in order to achieve real change for the Borough through our priorities which are:

- Improve health and wellbeing
- Build stronger communities
- Managed growth
- Deliver value

The sections below demonstrate how Customer Services contributes to each priority.

### **Improving Health and Wellbeing**

As the first point of contact to council services it is often the case that customers contact Solihull Connect about one enquiry which results in a wider conversation that can lead to additional services being offered. An example would be a customer who contacts us to make a payment and mentions that they '*wish they could give up smoking as they would save themselves a fortune*'. Through listening to what customers are telling us and sensitively offering options we can contribute to improving someone's health and wellbeing. In this example customer service advisers would be able to offer advice and information to help someone stop smoking. Another example would be being able to discuss financial issues with customers, ensuring that their income is maximised through appropriate benefits and planning achievable payment arrangements.

### **Building Stronger Communities**

Improving people's health and wellbeing enables them to be stronger individuals and more able to contribute in their community helping it to be stronger. Empowering people to access services how and when it's convenient for them enables individuals to participate in communities. By moving towards self service digital means of accessing services we are enabling people to participate in the 'digital world'. Supporting those who are less confident or less able means that they develop skills to enable them to participate more widely in communities that interest them such as; topic based forums through social media platforms, E-petitions, online self help groups as well as neighbourhood based activities.

### **Managed Growth**

Enabling people to be active participants in their community helps to them contribute to local economic growth. People who have a greater sense of health and wellbeing and are active within their local community or community of interest are more likely to be a contributor to the economy than a draw on it. Through helping people have improved health and wellbeing and be active participants in building stronger communities, customer service activities support managed growth.

Customer Services operates the Council's Business Reception and being the first introduction that potential investors may have to the Council, we aim to ensure a lasting positive impression of the Council by providing excellent customer service.

## **Deliver Value**

In providing excellent customer experiences across all access channels Customer Services;

- reduces the need for customers to contact the Council repeated times in order to get their enquiry resolved,
- ensures that customers are offered a holistic service and make every contact count,
- deals with customers' enquiries at the first point of contact to reduce cost and interruption of passing enquiries to service delivery teams.

The cost of contact made through the website is less than a tenth of the cost of a telephone contact which is around a third of the cost of a face to face contact. Implementing safe and easy to use self service access channels means that customers are more likely to want to use them. Moving to self service access channels not only provides improved choice and convenience for customers but means that contact services can be delivered more cost effectively.

Installing payment kiosks which can be accessed when Solihull Connect cash offices are unavailable maximises the opportunity for customers to make payments to the Council in a cost effective way.

## What have we done?

Since the last revision of the Customer Strategy we have made changes which improve our customers' experiences of contacting us:

1. As part of the development of 'The Core', the Council's refurbished Arts, Café, and Library building in central Solihull, we have redesigned the Solihull Connect walk in service and Cash Office. Improved self service facilities have been installed which are available when 'The Core' is open whether the Solihull Connect service is open or not.



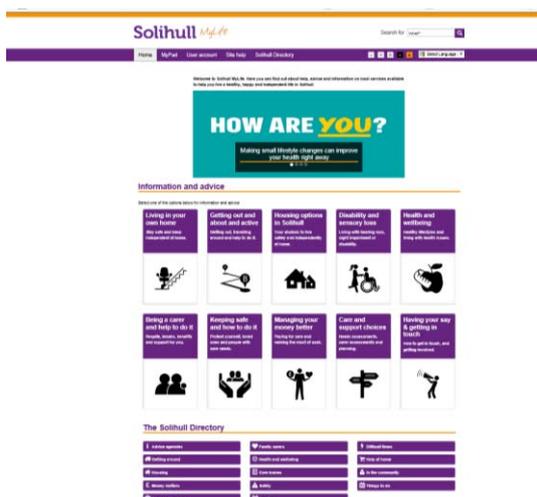
2. We have established the Solihull Connect Local brand along with neighbourhood library services providing access to self service facilities in community libraries as well as Elmwood Place, the Council's building in Smith's Wood. Customers using Solihull Connect Local facilities are able to access Council services via the internet or customer telephone as well as use library services.



3. In Shirley, as part of the Parkgate development we worked with colleagues in the Library and Information Service to develop a new integrated library and Solihull Connect service. Staff from both services work with each other to provide customers with an improved customer journey.
4. Solihull Connect helped Council Commissioners to develop a proposal around a more coordinated approach to the provision of information and advice provided by the community and voluntary sector. A Community Information and Advice service has now been commissioned and provides a face to face service for customers to receive specialist information, advice and or advocacy in one place. Previously customers who needed specialist advice, provided by community voluntary sector partner organisations, may have had to visit multiple locations to receive the advice they needed. The Community Information and Advice service brings these partners together. There are 2 Information and Advice hubs; one in Chelmsley Wood Library and another in 'The Core' in Solihull.
5. Solihull Connect along with the Communications Team launched an email subscription service, Stay Connected, which enables customers to subscribe to receive emails from the Council on a range of topics which interest them.
6. Solihull Connect has taken the opportunity to establish Facebook and Twitter accounts along with other Council services. These accounts extend social media as a way of communicating with and receiving feedback from customers.



- We have refreshed our corporate website <http://www.solihull.gov.uk> to make it more customer focussed and easier to navigate.
- We implemented 'Live Chat', our online instant message service, which enables customers using the website to contact a member of Solihull Connect staff for support. This also provides us with valuable feedback about where customers are finding difficulty on our website so that we can improve relevant content.



- Solihull Connect worked with colleagues across the Council, NHS and other service providers to create a new website. MyLife is aimed at helping customers to live better lives and brings together a range of information from money and housing to health, wellbeing and social care. This website also provides a resource directory enabling providers to advertise their services and customers to choose providers who best suit their needs.

- Solihull Connect developed a first point of contact for adult social care customers. This first point of contact has brought together a professional team of advisors who provide a consistent service.
- We collaborated with Solihull Community Housing and transferred staff from their walk in service into Solihull Connect. Solihull Connect now provides face to face contact for Council and Solihull Community Housing related enquires.



- We have installed payment kiosks in Solihull Connect walk in centres in Solihull and Chelmsley Wood which enable customers to make payments quickly and conveniently.
- We reviewed the structure of Solihull Connect and service provision followed by a restructure to provide the best value for money whilst maintaining service standards and delivering our Vision.
- To demonstrate our commitment to customers we have revised our Customer Charter and Customer Service Standards which are included as Appendices 1 and 2.

## 4. Our experience

In working with customers and benchmarking with other similar organisations for the last 15 years we have listened so that we understand what is important to customers. We have summarised what we have heard as the objectives we want to focus on and the table below explains why.

Customers can say	Why
I am listened to and my feedback helps improve services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We need to listen to and learn from people in order to ensure that services meet their needs. It is important to hear from customers who use our services as well as those who don't.</li> <li>• Feedback can take the form of comments, complaints and compliments and also the day to day contact that we receive from customers requesting information or requiring a service.</li> <li>• In order for feedback to result in improved services we will record and analyse it and then make information available to service areas.</li> <li>• Solihull Connect will be the 'voice' of the customer ensuring that service areas are challenged to improve on our customers' behalf.</li> </ul>
The people that I contact treat me as an individual and are focussed on my needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To enable us to 'hear' what customers are telling us we will recruit and retain staff with competency in customer service skills throughout the organisation.</li> <li>• In creating a Customer Services team we have separated customers from the people who deliver the service and risk staff seeing customer service as something that the customer services team does rather than what we all do. We need to bridge this gap and ensure that all staff understand their relationship with their customers and how to be customer focussed.</li> <li>• Customers will also often visit Libraries and Council receptions within their own communities to access advice and information and it is our aim to ensure that any member of staff contacted is able to respond appropriately</li> <li>• Training plays a part but more significantly this is achieved by the 'way we work around here' through ensuring customer focussed processes, targets set around customers and conversations that feature learning from customer feedback and this is supported by the commitments contained in the Council Plan.</li> <li>• We invest in our staff and work closely with partner organisations to make sure that our staff have knowledge about the whole community and not just the services that the Council provides.</li> </ul>

Customers can say	Why
<p>I am provided with appropriate access and support to enable me to use digital access channels</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within walk in centres our customer service advisers are moving towards assisting customers to self serve through encouraging people who are willing to use self service access channels. Customers will be welcomed by customer service staff who will direct them to the service they need. This will include being shown to self-service facilities where customers can either access information or services themselves or with assistance (assisted self service). For customers with more complex needs or who are unable to use self service facilities they will be able speak with the next available Customer Service Adviser face to face.</li> <li>• Access to Council services already exists through a number of channels; social media, website, email, telephone and face to face. We recognise that different people feel comfortable using different access channels and we want to provide access channels that suit them whilst also recognising that we must provide access channels which are value for money.</li> <li>• Aligned with the Council's Digital Strategy we want to support customers to be able to use self service access channels.</li> <li>• We believe that there will always be a need for a face to face service for the most vulnerable and complex cases.</li> </ul>
<p>There is no wrong front door and I only tell my story once</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solihull Connect was created as the Council's Customer Services brand. The brand is all about connecting customers with the services they need including where those services are provided by partner organisations.</li> <li>• In creating a 'single point of contact' and by using multi-skilled staff we minimise the need for customers to be handed to different advisers where they have more than enquiry.</li> <li>• Being able to talk to customers in a holistic way also maximises our opportunity to make early interventions to prevent help prevent people falling into crisis.</li> <li>• We work closely with partner organisations to ensure that our customers' journeys are joined up minimising the need for customers to have to retell their situation multiple times.</li> </ul>
<p>I am provided with a responsive and value for money contact service</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solihull Connect contact service operates to agreed performance targets to minimise the need for customers to wait before being responded to.</li> <li>• Feedback from customer surveys tells us that customers value an appropriate response over wait times within reason.</li> <li>• We need to balance these performance targets with the cost of the service – increasing performance is more expensive.</li> </ul>

## 5. What are we planning?

The Council Plan makes it clear that the Council has the ambition to be an organisation that our staff and citizens say is a great one. Our priorities are the means by which we will become 'great' and these are:

- To improve health and wellbeing
- Managed growth
- Build stronger communities
- Deliver value

These corporate priorities drive everything that we do. The table below shows the key actions being taken to meet the objectives of this strategy and all link with these corporate priorities. Beneath each key action are a series of activities which are monitored through Leadership Team meetings.

Objective	Key actions
I am listened to and my feedback helps improve services	Provide customer feedback to service areas to enable service improvements in line with customers' needs.
The people that I contact treat me as an individual and are focussed on my needs	On-going customer focussed training and quality monitoring of customer service staff. Each member of staff has an annual Performance Development Review (PDR) plan in which clear customer focussed objectives are set, discussed and monitored through regular meetings with their line manager to ensure appropriate behaviour development.
I am provided with appropriate access and support to enable me to use digital access channels	Support customers to move from 'us doing it for them' to 'doing it for themselves' through the appropriate provision of and assistance to use self service facilities giving flexible and reliable access to services.  Review and improve access to online services including providing an online customer account.
There is no wrong front door and I only tell my story once	Working closely with others to ensure that customers' journeys are focussed on customers not our individual services, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Library and Information Services</li> <li>• Council building receptions including; Council House, Better Living Centre and Elmwood Place</li> <li>• West Midlands Police</li> <li>• Solihull Community Housing</li> <li>• Public Health and NHS</li> <li>• Community Information and Advice Hubs</li> </ul>

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Key actions</b>
I am provided with a responsive and value for money contact service	Review performance targets for contact channel waiting times. Increase take-up of self service access channels to minimise cost elsewhere in the service. Ensure that we have a fit for purpose structure to ensure cost effective resourcing.