

# North Tyneside Council

## Report to Cabinet

Date: 18 March 2024

Title: We Listen, We Care – Customer Service Programme End of Phase Three Review

---

Portfolio(s): Deputy Mayor	Cabinet Member(s): Councillor Carl Johnson
Report from Service Area:	Corporate Strategy and Customer Service
Responsible Officer:	Jacqueline Laughton, Assistant Chief Executive Tel: (0191) 643 5724
Wards affected:	All

---

### PART 1

#### 1.1 Executive Summary:

On 28 May 2019 Cabinet agreed the Authority's Customer Service Programme – 'we listen and we care' ("the Programme").

The Programme has been an organisation wide effort to bring to life two of the Authority's values – 'we listen' and 'we care' to deliver even better customer service and experience. This key priority, driven by the Elected Mayor, was based on the experience and feedback from residents, customers, colleagues and Elected Members. The Authority understands clearly the cost of not getting customer service and experience right, both in terms of poorer outcomes for customers, and the cost to the organisation in time and resources spent 'fixing things' later.

Appendix one of this report is the 'End of Programme Review 2019–2024' which sets out what has been delivered under the Programme to date, including a review of its most recent stage, Phase Three. The report sets out key

achievements, what has been delivered, the Programme's approach to managing change, and lessons learned.

Significant views have been sought as part of the End of Stage Review, including feedback from customers, partners and wider stakeholders.

Assessing progress of the Programme's deliverables and the Authority's continued ambition in the 'Our North Tyneside Plan', future priorities for customer service and experience are identified in the End of Stage review report.

## **1.2 Recommendation(s):**

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- (1) notes the progress made in Phase Three of the Customer Service Programme, and indeed all Phases of the Programme;
- (2) agree the closure of the Customer Service Programme, as set out in section 1.5.5 of this report; and
- (3) agree the future priorities for customer service and experience for the Authority, as set out in section 1.5.5 of this report.

## **1.3 Forward Plan:**

Twenty eight days notice of this report has been given and it first appeared on the Forward Plan that was published on 5 January 2024.

## **1.4 Council Plan and Policy Framework**

This report relates to the following priorities in the 2021-25 Our North Tyneside Plan:

- a thriving North Tyneside
- a family friendly North Tyneside
- a secure North Tyneside, and
- a caring North Tyneside.

The Customer Service Programme contributes to the overall vision of the 'Our North Tyneside Plan'; supporting the Authority to listen to its customers and deliver services based on that feedback. The Programme aims to improve

overall customer satisfaction, and the efficiency and cost of delivering services, contributing to the 'Our North Tyneside Plan'.

## 1.5 Information:

### 1.5.1 Background

A key theme running through the 'Our North Tyneside Plan' is to listen to residents and to focus on ensuring that the Authority works better for residents. On 28 May 2019 Cabinet agreed to a programme of work to focus on how the Authority demonstrates those values and delivers great customer service to all customers.

The Programme has driven this work over the last four years aiming to improve overall levels of satisfaction amongst its customers whilst keeping pace with their changing needs and expectations, managing demand in line with reducing resources, as well as ensuring that the Authority's staff are motivated and focused on delivering excellent services.

Phase One of the Programme was reviewed by Cabinet on 19 February 2021 and the priorities for Phase Two were agreed at that time, building in learning from the Authority's Covid-19 Recovery Programme. Phase Two of the Programme was then reviewed by Cabinet on 17 October 2022 and priorities for Phase Three agreed then.

### 1.5.2 Scope and approach

The Customer Service Programme has delivered improvements in line with four key priorities:

- improved customer service standards across all Authority services, (Customer Promise)
- improved clarity, quality and consistency of the small but vital impressions the Authority makes, in communication and branding (Brilliant Basics)
- improved services which are designed and delivered around the needs of customers, (Customer First) and
- an increased culture of continuous improvement (Better Never Stops).

It was led by the Customer Service Programme Board comprising the Deputy Mayor and Deputy Chief Executive, as well as senior leaders representing Authority service areas. Workstreams, led by Senior Managers, oversaw the delivery of 35 change projects managed by officers and supported by the Programme team.

A Benefit Framework was developed to identify and monitor the intended outcomes that the Programme aimed to achieve; simply put, the value gained as a result of doing this work. It was approved by the Programme Board on 16 May 2022 and has been monitored every six months; the outcome and impact are referenced within the Appended End of Phase Three Review report.

### 1.5.3 Achievements of the Programme

The Programme has made improvements to the way the Authority works for its customers, from long term cultural and organisational change, medium term improvements to ways of working and technology, and short-term activities that 'just made sense' to do. It has created a shared focus on customer experience across the organisation and with the Authority's partners, galvanising knowledge, passion and experience for delivering great customer service and experience.

92% of colleagues across all the Authority's service areas say that they know what great customer service is, with over 1,850 colleagues completing customer service training. New 'customer first' policies have been launched to better support colleagues at work, and customer promise days have given them the opportunity to share their customer service skills with other service areas; over 10% more feel valued at work and feel safe to speak up and challenge. Teams have tested their commitment to the customer promise, as well as increasing their digital skills and confidence through bespoke training courses, helped by the creation of a skill's learning zone.

Improving the clarity, quality and consistency of the way the Authority works with customers has helped the Authority 'get things right first time'. The impact of this is seen in customer complaints; 40% reduction in complaints to just over 400 a year. New branding across physical and online services and the development of a tone of voice guide has resulted in the improvement of hundreds of customer letters, information and leaflets and the review of over 3,500 webpages to ensure they give customers what they want and need.

Customer access into the Authority's services has been improved with new British Sign Language videos added to the online offer and Sign Video support

at customer services, leisure and library centres. Over 50 Authority buildings have been audited for accessibility and a review of the customer access and accessibility statements completed. Customer satisfaction with customer services is 92%, up from 88% and over the last four years over 500 colleagues, residents and community groups have been celebrated for having the 'Spirit of North Tyneside'.

The Programme has put customers first through the creation of the Customer First Office in 2022, and by introducing and improving online tools and systems, enabling them to do more online; report, book and find. Developing the digital offer has improved access for children to healthy school meals with £1,607,275 worth of meals paid for online to date, increased access to leisure activities with 70% of classes now booked online, and improved payment for services; 99% of payments from customers are now digital. Alongside this the Programme has ensured that access for those who are digitally excluded is available ensuring that no one is left behind. Improving communication with customers through new 'Who can help' and 'Neat Streets' cards keeps them informed; more customers feel listened to, feel their issue was resolved and that the Authority did what it said it would do.

#### 1.5.4 Customer experience now

A commitment to delivering great customer service and experience has no end point and the Authority will continue to listen to and learn from what customers tell us matter to them.

General satisfaction levels with the Authority have fluctuated over recent years, however, satisfaction with some services like parks and green spaces, library services, have improved. Customer complaints have reduced by 40% and customers rating their recent interaction with the Authority has remained stable. Elected Member enquiries have increased year on year with the most common issues related to highways, traffic management and enquiries about trees, linked to storms and bad weather in 2021 and 2022.

More colleagues feel valued and say morale is improving; three quarters of colleagues said they are proud to work for the Authority, and 72% said they would recommend working for the Authority to friends and family. Whilst this is positive, embedding the customer promise internally and not just externally, will be an ongoing priority.

### 1.5.5 End of Phase Review: What's next?

In assessing the progress and achievements of the Programme and the Authority's continued ambition and commitment to great customer service, the following future priorities for continuing to improve customer service and experience have been identified.

- Creating a home for customer experience with a focus on good customer service will ensure the momentum created by the Programme continues.
- Improving how customer experience is gathered, used and then shared with teams and services will support service improvements, linking what customers are saying with service planning and future priorities.
- The customer promise will continue to be embedded across the Authority and partners, ensuring it is applied consistently and the Authority can evidence how we deliver it and the impact it has on all customers, external and internal.
- Continuing to increase the digital skills and confidence of the Authority's workforce, will help them to work more effectively and support customers to access the Authority's increasing digital services and improving website. Putting customers at the heart of the Authority's digital developments will ensure access to all services is equitable and easy, and no one is excluded
- Improvements to the consistency and quality of written information will continue to be prioritised, alongside improvements in the way officers speak to customers and when, and how they respond to issues and complaints, fix things and say sorry, and use their experience to learn.

### 1.6 **Decision options:**

The following decision options are available for consideration by Cabinet:

#### Option 1

Cabinet agrees to the recommendations set out in paragraph 1.2 of the report.

## Option 2

Cabinet does not agree to the recommendation set out in paragraph 1.2 of the report and requests a different set of principles for customer service and experience be developed.

Option 1 is the recommended option.

### **1.7 Reasons for recommended option:**

Option 1 is recommended for the following reasons:

The recommendation outlined has been developed following a formal End of Programme review of the Customer Service Programme. The proposal to close the Programme and establish a Customer Service and Experience function will continue to support the ambition set out in the Programme and the four objectives agreed by Cabinet on 28 May 2019.

### **1.8 Appendices:**

'Appendix One: Customer Service Programme End of Phase Three review – We Listen, We Care – March 2024'.

### **1.9 Contact officers:**

'Jacqueline Laughton, Head of Corporate Strategy, tel. (0191) 643 5724'

'Haley Hudson, Head of Customer Experience and Public Sector Reform, tel. (0191) 643 7008'

'David Dunford, Senior Business Partner, tel. (0191) 643 7027'

'Suzanne Duncan, Senior Manager People Services, tel. (0191) 643 4917'

'Harry Wearing, Senior Manager Communications and Marketing, tel. 07717862592'

### **1.10 Background information:**

The following background papers / information have been used in the compilation of this report and are available at the office of the author:

(1) Report to Cabinet – We Listen and We Care NTC Customer Service Programme 28 May 2019

<https://democracy.northtyneside.gov.uk/documents/s798/We%20Listen%20and%20We%20Care%20North%20Tyneside%20Council.pdf>

- (2) Report to Cabinet – Covid-19 A Framework for Recovery in North Tyneside  
29 June 2020  
<https://democracy.northtyneside.gov.uk/documents/s4039/Covid-19%20-%20A%20Framework%20for%20Recovery%20in%20North%20Tyneside.pdf>
- (3) Report to Cabinet – North Tyneside Council Customer Service  
Programme 22 February 2021  
<https://democracy.northtyneside.gov.uk/documents/s5490/North%20Tyneside%20Customer%20Service%20Programme.pdf>
- (4) North Tyneside Council Digital Strategy 2023-2027  
<https://my.northtyneside.gov.uk/sites/default/files/web-page-related-files/A%20Digital%20Strategy%20for%20North%20Tyneside%202023-27%20v1.pdf>
- (5) Digitally Well – A partnership approach to increasing digital inclusion in North Tyneside 2023 – 2028 – June 2023  
<https://my.northtyneside.gov.uk/sites/default/files/web-page-related-files/Digital%20Inclusion%20strategy%20FINAL%202023.pdf>
- (6) Connecting Communities – A Strategy for Community Hubs and Libraries 2023 – 2028  
<https://my.northtyneside.gov.uk/sites/default/files/web-page-related-files/Connecting%20Communities%20-%20A%20Strategy%20for%20Community%20Hubs%20and%20Libraries%202023%20-%202028.pdf>
- (7) Equality Impact Assessment BAU – Customer Service Programme June 2023 – Attached

## **PART 2 – COMPLIANCE WITH PRINCIPLES OF DECISION MAKING**

### **2.1 Finance and other resources**

Any financial implications arising from the activities in the Customer Service Programme have been met from existing service budgets and as agreed in the Medium-Term Financial Planning process.

Any financial implications arising from the creation of a Customer Service and Experience function will be met from existing service budgets, as agreed in the Medium-Term Financial Planning process.



## **2.2 Legal**

There are no legal implications from this report.

## **2.3 Consultation / community engagement**

### **2.3.1 Internal Consultation**

The report is based on a range of surveys, discussions, workshops and meetings with the Elected Mayor and Cabinet Members, Party Group Leaders, Senior Managers, and council officers. Section 4.5 of the End of Phase Three Review report (Appendix One) details in full all internal consultation and engagement undertaken throughout the Programme.

### **2.3.2 External Consultation / Engagement**

Extensive Borough-wide consultation has informed this report; The Annual Big Community Conversations, Budget Engagement, and Annual State of the Area Events. Further engagement has taken place through the Customer First Office in their response to complaints and Members Enquiries, and engagement with NHS and voluntary and community organisations has driven the development of key Strategies; Connecting Communities and Digital Inclusion. Section 6 of the End of Phase Three Review report (Appendix One) details in the external consultation and engagement undertaken throughout the Programme.

## **2.4 Human rights**

Article 14 of the Human Rights Act 1998 prohibits discrimination on any ground. The Customer Service Programme has been developed to promote inclusion and create consistency of customer service responses, to all customers.

## **2.5 Equalities and diversity**

All Phases of the Customer Service Programme have been developed with due regard to the Authority's obligations under the Equality Act 2010.

An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) was completed for the Programme during Phase Three to ensure that the changes implemented through the Programme are fair and do not disadvantage or create barriers to participation for any protected groups. The EqIA will be closed as part of Programme close-down arrangements and new EqIA's produced, where needed, in accordance with existing Authority requirements.

The Customer Service Programme was focused on ensuring the Authority listens to and cares about the views and needs of all its customers. The Programme Board had clear and regular communication with the Authority's Corporate Equality Group. The Board was responsible for identifying improvement projects that require Equality Impact Assessments to be undertaken and ensuring that their findings are acted upon to deliver inclusive customer service.

The Customer Service Programme supported delivery of the Authority's Equality and Diversity Policy, in particular, key elements in section 6 of the Policy - 'Equality and Diversity in Service Provision' and its corporate equality objectives regarding staff training, use of equality data, accessible buildings and services and communication.

## 2.6 Risk management

Individual improvement projects, within the Customer Service Programme had their own risk management monitoring in place and workstream leads met regularly with the Authority's Senior Risk Advisor, to update the overall risk management plan which was reviewed quarterly by the Programme Board.

In creating a new Customer Experience service risk will be identified by the Head of Customer Experience and Public Sector Reform and managed within the Corporate Risk Management plan.

## 2.7 Crime and disorder

There are no crime and disorder implications arising directly from this report.

## 2.8 Environment and sustainability

There are potential positive implications for environment and sustainability, as the increased use of digital technology by the Authority's teams and its customers continues to increase. This will help embed work undertaken to tackle climate change across the Authority and its services, supporting the delivery of the Carbon Net-Zero 2030 Action Plan.

## PART 3 - SIGN OFF

• Chief Executive

• Director(s) of Service

• Mayor/Cabinet Member(s)

• Chief Finance Officer

• Monitoring Officer

• Assistant Chief Executive