

Cabinet	 TOWER HAMLETS
20 th September 2023	
Report of: Caroline Holland, Interim Corporate Director of Resources	Classification: Unrestricted
Tower Hamlets Customer Experience Strategy 2023-26 Post Consultation	

Lead Member	Councillor Kabir Ahmed
Originating Officer(s)	Raj Chand, Director of Customer Services Leah Sykes, Head of Customer Service Keiko Okawa, Strategy and Policy Lead, Place and Resources Tope Alegbeleye, Strategy and Policy Officer, Strategy, Policy and Improvement for Place and Resources
Wards affected	All
Key Decision?	No
Reason for Key Decision	N/A
Forward Plan Notice Published	19/07/2023
Exempt information	N/A
Strategic Plan Priority / Outcome	[Priority 8 “A council that listens and works for everyone from the Strategic Plan 2022-26]

Executive Summary

This report presents the final version of the Tower Hamlets Customer Experience Strategy 2023 -2026 (Appendix A). Public engagement of a draft strategy occurred from 5 June till 7 July and the council staff consultation from 21 June till 7 July. Feedback and comments from the public, business and the council staff are incorporated into the final draft of the strategy.

The public engagement of residents and businesses were commissioned. Feedback from the residents is generally very positive. There is also overwhelming support for the strategy’s vision and each outcome. There were low levels of dissatisfaction attributed to the council’s current achievement of these outcomes although a significant number picked a neutral option due to mixed opinions. The business survey also shows overwhelming support for the vision and outcomes, although their views towards their experience of contacting the council was not as favourable as the residents’.

Recommendations:

The Mayor in Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Note the outcome of the public and staff engagement that informs the Tower Hamlets Customer Experience Strategy 2023-26.
2. Agree the Tower Hamlets Customer Experience Strategy 2023-26.

1 REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

- 1.1 The Tower Hamlets Council Strategic Plan 2022-2026 includes a policy “Maintain face to face services for those who need them while providing a better-designed, streamlined digital offer for residents who want to access services online” under Priority 8 “A council that listens and works for everyone”. This strategy is being developed to deliver this policy.
- 1.2 The council have an aspiration that all customers benefit from accessible and high-quality services regardless of channel. We know that we need to change and improve our approach to customer service, whilst over the last 4 years we have greatly improved the online offer, the way we currently provide customer services is still largely based around having contact by phone. Too many follow-up contacts are still being made and the main reason for contact is to report a problem or request information. The strategy sets out how the council improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the customer service offer.

2 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 2.1 “Do nothing” option. The council could choose not to have a customer experience strategy. This would mean a continuation of the status quo, which would limit the council’s ability to transform the delivery the experience our customers receive when accessing our services.

3 DETAILS OF THE REPORT

Background

- 3.1 Tower Hamlets has the fastest growing population and the highest population density in England and Wales. The borough has also one of the youngest, and most diverse populations in the UK. The borough had the largest increased in the number of households in the country between the 2011 and 2021 census. A consequence of the cost-of-living crisis means an increase in service demand and assistant given to residents, businesses, and other users of our services. Demands for the council services are expected to increase and are complex.

- 3.2 Increasingly more service users expect a better-designed, streamlined digital offer. In 2021, 92% of the borough households had the internet at home, which is on in line with the national level. The use of digital technology has become important in the delivery of customer service. The council seeks to provide a high-quality customer experience in the digital age to help meet increasing demand for services.
- 3.3 At the same time, some residents do not use the Internet and choose face to face and/or telephone to contact the council. Research shows that a small proportion of adults (14% nationally) do not use the Internet. The strategy sets out the way we provide the service for all our customers, regardless of their needs and preferences to contact the council.
- 3.4 This strategy shows our commitment to delivering consistent and high-quality customer service that will increase the satisfaction of our residents. In the mid-pandemic resident survey 2021, only 32% of respondents agreed that “my council is doing a good job”. We want to change that by listening to our customers and meeting their needs.

Summary of the Strategy

- 3.5 The Tower Hamlets Customer Experience Strategy (Appendix 1) sets out our vision, customer promise, desired outcomes and measures.
- 3.6 The customer experience vision is “**Public service is at the heart of what we do. The council will listen and with a commitment to service excellence, work collaboratively internally and in partnership with our voluntary and community services to design and deliver fit for purpose services across the council**”. To achieve the vision, the strategy is committed to delivering three key outcomes:
- **Outcome 1:** Council services are easily accessible, and inclusive.
 - **Outcome 2:** Utilise feedback, data, technology and innovation to improve services.
 - **Outcome 3:** Embed a customer-focused culture to deliver an excellent customer experience.
- 3.7 Underpinning each priority will be several clear objectives, which aims to ensure that we communicate clearly to our customers what we are able to offer them and in turn outlines are expectations of our customers.

How was the Strategy Developed

- 3.8 In developing the strategy, it was essential that we engaged and consulted with staff, customers and our key stakeholders, including the Institute of Customer Service.
- We held various events designed to give staff the opportunity to feed into the strategy as it develops.

- This included Customer Service Smarter Working POD sessions, including two POD sessions, held last October during the National Customer Service Week.
- In conjunction with the Institute of Customer Service, we launched an internal staff survey, designed to assess staff views on how the council's strategy, organisation, culture, and processes enable them to deliver excellent customer service. More than three hundred staff completed the staff survey.
- A Customer Service Steering Group has been established, consisting of officers and managers from a wide range of services across the council as well as external partners from the East London Business Alliance, THCVS and the Institute of Customer Service. The Steering Group plays a critical role in providing feedback and oversight in the development of the strategy.
- Members have been engaged. An article on the development of the strategy was published in Member's bulletin in October 2022
- To gain feedback from the users of our services, an external customer survey was carried out to draft a strategy.

3.9 To ensure that our strategy is driven by evidence, we have reviewed national, regional and local data (Appendix 6).

3.10 The Customer Experience Strategy, has noted and considered other Tower Hamlet strategies and plan, including the: -

- Strategic Plan 2022-2026.
- Digital Inclusion Strategy
- Communications Strategy 2021-22
- IT strategy
- The complaints process - [The complaints process \(towerhamlets.gov.uk\)](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk)
- Potentially Violent Persons Procedure (emerging)
- Customer Code of Conduct (emerging)

3.11 To ensure that the Customer Experience Strategy takes into account good practice and can be benchmarked against other public sector organisations, we have worked and consulted with the Institute of Customer Service.

Public Consultation Summary

3.12 The draft Strategy was launched for public consultation on 5 June running until 7 July. To ensure that a cross section of the community was able to engage in the consultation the following engagement methods has been used.

- Resident survey (face to face and telephone, commissioned): 1,108 resident samples. The survey participants largely correspond with the demographic make-up of the borough as identified by the 2021 census. Below are breakdowns of the survey participants:
 - Male – 50%, Female – 50%

○ Age groups

16-24	16%
25-34	28%
35-44	23%
45-54	16%
55-64	11%
65+	7%

○ Ethnic background

White	50%
Mixed	3%
Asian	37%
Black	8%
Other	1%

○ Wards

Whitechapel	6%
Weavers	4%
Stephney Green	4%
Bethnal Green West	6%
St Katharine's & Wapping	4%
St Dunstan's	4%
Spitalfields & Banglatown	4%
Shadwell	5%
Poplar	3%
Mile End	6%
Limehouse	2%
Lansbury	7%
Island Gardens	5%
Canary Wharf	6%
Bromley South	5%
Bromley North	4%
Bow West	5%
Bow East	6%
Blackwall & Cubitt Town	7%
Bethnal Green East	7%

- Business survey (face to face and telephone, commissioned): 50 business samples.
- Let's talk Tower Hamlets online survey: for residents and businesses: 18 people responded.
- Council staff survey (online, 21 June-7 July): 145 responded.

The number of people completing the survey on Let's Talk Tower Hamlets was low. The commissioned residents survey feedback provides robust information on the views of residents and businesses. Detailed analysis of the survey responses can be found in Appendix 2, 4 and 7

Engagement analysis

3.13 The survey results have informed the final strategy. Below are key findings arising from the survey results:

Support for the vision and outcomes

- Both resident and business survey respondents overwhelmingly support the strategy's vision and outcomes: 94%-96% of the residents and 94%-100% business respondents supported them.
- Substantial council officers supported the strategy vision and outcomes (60%-77%).

Support for the Customer Promise

- A huge majority of residents (95%) and businesses (98%) find that the Customer Promise is clear about what our customers can expect from us and what we expect from our customers.
- Most staff (76%) also agree with it.

Rooms for improvement

- The survey feedback underpins our original finding, which is, we have rooms for improvement in our customer service delivery. Businesses have harsher views towards our practices than residents.
- Not many staff respondents (31%) had an opportunity to attend customer service training.

3.14 In the resident survey, the respondents were asked a question on their views about their experience with the council, i.e., 'Thinking about your most recent experience with the council, please state to what extent you agree with the statements below'. The table below shows the results:

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree
Staff were helpful and polite	83%	1%	16%
Staff had sufficient knowledge	76%	1%	22%
Able to access the information and service easily	67%	3%	30%
Responded to me at the agreed timescale	66%	3%	31%
Get through to the right person at the first contact	56%	6%	38%

As the evidence pack (Appendix 6) shows, the Mid pandemic resident survey 2021 (1,108 samples) included questions related to customer service. The table below shows the results to the question, 'What extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?'

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
My council has staff who are friendly and polite	73%	16%	11%
My council is difficult to get through to on the phone	59%	27%	14%

My council responds quickly when asked for help	44%	42%	13%
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It should be highlighted that the questions of these two surveys are different, and we cannot simply compare between them. However, 83% of the respondents of the resident survey of this time agreed with 'Staff were helpful and polite' and 73% of the respondents of the mid pandemic resident survey agreed with 'My council has staff who are friendly and polite'.

- 3.15 The engagement analysis shows the draft strategy is supported by the external and internal stakeholders. The final version of the strategy remains the same as the draft version.

Action plan

- 3.16 The analysis also supports our views that our practice around customer service needs to be substantially improved. Once the strategy is agreed, we will develop an action plan to achieve the vision and outcomes set out by the strategy. The feedback will inform the development of actions. Actions arising from the engagement will include engaging businesses to improve our customer service provision for them and making customer service training widely available for the staff.

- 3.17 The delivery of an action plan and future business cases will be reported back to and monitored by the Transformation Board, CMT and the Mayors Office. Business cases will be costed and taken through the annual budget process for transformational projects. The council services will continue being engaged to deliver the action plan and improve our customer service provision.

4 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 An Equalities Analysis is attached (Appendix 3). The strategy aims to improve the experience that customers receive when engaging the services. The aspiration of the council is to provide a consistent service regardless of the channel chosen to communicate with the council. It is considered the strategy will benefit groups that have issues to access the council. For example, people aged 65 and over are less likely to have access to the Internet. The provision of the Resident Hub enables them to receive face to face support from the council.

5 OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 This section of the report is used to highlight further specific statutory implications that are either not covered in the main body of the report or are required to be highlighted to ensure decision makers give them proper consideration. Examples of other implications may be:
- Best Value Implications,
 - Consultations,
 - Environmental (including air quality),

- Risk Management,
- Crime Reduction,
- Safeguarding.
- Data Protection / Privacy Impact Assessment.

5.2 Best value authorities are under a general Duty of Best Value to “make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.” This strategy will help deliver the Best Value requirement by collecting and reviewing data to improve the customer service provision and providing more efficient and effective customer service.

6 COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

6.1 The action plan will have costs associated with it which are not quantified at this stage.

7 COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES

7.1 As stated in Paragraph 5.2 the Public Engagement and resultant Strategy assists the Council in meeting its Best Value duties as required by the Local Government Act 1999 section 3.

Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

- None

Appendices

- Tower Hamlets Customer Experience Strategy (Appendix 1)
- Tower Hamlets Customer Experience Strategy Business survey results PowerPoint (Appendix 2)
- Customer Experience Strategy Equalities Analysis (Appendix 3)
- Tower Hamlets Customer Experience Strategy council staff survey results (Appendix 4)
- Tower Hamlets Customer Experience Strategy Residents survey results PowerPoint (Appendix 5)
- Tower Hamlets Customer Experience Strategy Evidence Base (Appendix 6)
- Tower Hamlets Customer Experience Strategy Residents survey results – Let’s talk Tower Hamlets (Appendix 7)

Background Documents – Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012

- None

Officer contact details for documents:

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