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**CUSTOMER CHARTER**

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**Responsible Cabinet Member – Councillor Jenny Chapman,  
Communities and Engagement Portfolio**

**Responsible Director – Lorraine O’Donnell, Assistant Chief Executive**

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**Purpose of Report**

1. To present the Council’s draft Customer Charter at **Appendix 1** for approval.

**Information and Analysis**

2. This Council is committed to placing customers ‘centre stage’ to the business of the organisation. Many services have their own Customer Charters or Compacts and Charter Marks have been awarded to a number of service areas including: Connecting with Communities; Adults Social Services Home Care Team; Cultural Services; Democratic Services and the Horticultural Nursery. Many services in Community Services also have ISO awards.
3. However whilst there are examples of good practice within the authority in relation to customer focus the Council does not have a corporate Customer Charter which sets out customer service standards, informs the customer of the standards of service to expect, what to do if something goes wrong and how to make contact.
4. The Charter has been shaped by guidance produced by the Institute of Customer Service. The guidance outlines that a Charter should:
  - (a) Spell out the standards of service customers can expect
  - (b) Tell customers how to complain if something goes wrong, or service is not met.
  - (c) Make clear how customers can contact the organisation
  - (d) Make sure the information is accessible and easy to understand
  - (e) Fully involve customers and employees in its preparation
  - (f) Make sure that the publication date is clearly visible, and ensure that the content remains current.
5. In order to develop the Charter, three staff focus groups were undertaken during October 2007. Community engagement was also undertaken at the ‘Talking Together’ events held in the five Street Scene areas during October/November 2007.
6. During the development of the Charter, staff and residents were asked to identify as ‘customers’ what were the key components of excellent customer service. The following is a list of the most frequent points that came up in discussions and which in turn have been reflected in the Customer Charter .

7. Key components of excellent customer service:-
  - (a) Be welcoming and polite
  - (b) Listen carefully to what is being said
  - (c) Be friendly, helpful and respectful
  - (d) Go the extra mile
  - (e) Keep people updated
  - (f) Take ownership of the query, avoiding passing the person around to a number of different departments.
  
8. The draft Charter re-enforces the value the Council places on ensuring that the public's interaction with us is a good experience. It sets out the Council's overarching general principles for going the 'extra mile' in our customer focus approach. The Charter also details specific standards in the various ways we interact with the public: in relation to visits to our reception points; staff visiting people in their own homes; answering the telephone, responding to written correspondence and dealing with complaints.
  
9. Taking into account Darlington's existing targets and performance the following targets are put forward for inclusion in the Customer Charter for 2008/09:
  - (a) 80% of telephone calls to be answered within 20 seconds
  - (b) 90% of letters, faxes and emails to receive a final reply within 10 working days
  - (c) 90% of visitors to the Call and Contact Centre to be seen within 10 minutes of their arrival.
  
10. The Charter also includes targets for dealing with complaints arising from the recent review of complaints in addition to response times set down by statute for Adult and Children Service complaints.

### **Outcome of Consultation**

11. Staff and residents have had an opportunity to provide feedback on the draft charter. With regards staff engagement, the Charter has been considered by CMT, Corporate Managers network and was circulated to all senior managers of the Council. Overall, staff are supportive of the Charter and the majority of comments received were about making the language clearer in the document and changes were made as a result.
  
12. The Charter has been forwarded to over 400 residents on the Talking Together database. Residents were asked:-
  - (a) Do you agree with the statements that are included in the Charter?
  - (b) Are there any changes that you would like to suggest?
  - (c) What do you think the Charter should be called?
  
13. Sixty feedback sheets have been returned. 56 respondents agreed with the statements included in the Charter and only 4 did not. Three respondents felt that the Charter was too long and needed to be more concise. A full list of comments are attached at **Appendix 2.**

14. Four residents responding to the consultation felt it was inappropriate to call the document a 'Customer Charter' one individual made the following comment 'The terms "customer" and "customer charter" are not helpful, I do not patronise or buy your services. I can't shop around or compare prices. There is no contract or exchange of money. I am in fact a partner/stakeholder, without the co-operation of the general public, a council could not provide many of the services it does, "customer" implies us vs. them; your charter needs to be inclusive'. Alternatives put forward to the term "customer" were, Residents Charter or Service User Charter. However, the majority of people supported the term customer.
15. Two residents felt that the Charter was a waste of money, stating that statements contained within it are common sense and council staff should be applying them now without the need for these statements to be written down.
16. Three people questioned the targets contained within the Charter. Two people felt that the target to answer 80% of calls within 10- 20 seconds was not good enough. This target was set to amalgamate and reflect performance against the Council's two current targets for answering telephone calls, the Council's Corporate target to answer 90% of calls within 10 seconds (last quarter performance was 86.5%) and the Call Centre target to answer 80% of calls within 20 seconds (average performance is currently 74%). The target of 80% was set to reflect existing performance. One respondent thought that the Council should not operate an automated telephone call system as this detracted from customer care.
17. One person felt that the Council should respond to 100% of written correspondence within 10 working days rather than 90%. The current council target for responding to written correspondence within 10 working days is 85% (the last quarter performance was 93%). However, the target suggested in the Charter reflects changes to how the post is to be dealt with in the future and these changes need to bed down. In considering comments received and current performance against targets it would seem appropriate to leave the targets in the Charter as they are. These will be reviewed annually.
18. Outlined in the table below are suggestions put forward for inclusion in the Charter together with responses to the suggestions made.

Suggestion	Response
We will involve you in discussions and decision making where feasible and sensible	The statement 'Provide opportunities for you to give us feedback on how we are delivering our services' Be changed to: 'Provide opportunities for you <b>to be consulted and</b> give us feedback on how we are delivering our services'.
We will deliver services in consultation and cooperation with users.	As above
There should be a section in the document relating to consulting members of the public regularly for their views on issues which affect them and how this will take place.	As above

Suggestion	Response
We aim to provide services in partnership with service users/public of Darlington	It does not seem appropriate to include this statement. The Charter is not about working in partnership but about being clear on how we interact with the public.
We will respond to user enquires within timescales	This is dealt with by the statement ‘ Be prompt with our responses’ and the targets contained within the document
In responding to enquires, council staff should make reference to the date of the user’s enquiry: - thank you for your letter/call/email of DD/MM/YY.	The statement ‘Provide a full response to 90% of letters, faxes and e-mails within 10 working days. If we are not able to we will write to give you a date when you can expect a full reply.  Be changed to:  ‘Provide a full response to 90% of letters, faxes and e-mails within 10 working days <b>making reference to the date of your enquiry</b> . If we are not able to we will write to give you a date when you can expect a full reply.
Allow customers to speak	This is covered by the statement ‘We will listen carefully to what you say’.
Make the section on Complaints clearer. Stage 1 first level response, Stage 2, set out what the next stages are if a member of the public is not happy with the outcome of the stage 2 complaint.	The Charter has been changed to make it clearer that a stage 1 complaint is informal whilst stage 2 is a formal investigation. The Charter also refers how to access the Council’s complaints procedures.
Ask your permission to answer the telephone should it ring whilst dealing with you calls should be diverted if someone is being spoken to.	Since it is not always practical to divert or switch off telephone calls the current statement seems appropriate ‘Ask your permission to answer the telephone should it ring whilst dealing with you’.
You don’t include anything for deaf and hearing impaired people. Is there access to someone who uses sign language? Is there a loop system? Is there a quiet area with good lighting for those who need to lip-read?	This is covered by the statement ‘Assist any visitors with particular access requirements’.
If you visit we will – turn off our telephone to minimise disturbance	As above

19. Detailed below are suggested names for the Charter put forward by residents. One member of staff suggested ‘Up close and personal’.
- Customer Caring Charter
  - Darlington Borough Council Customer Charter
  - Darlington Residents Charter
  - DBC Service Pledges
  - DBC Residents Compact
  - Customer Communications

- (g) Delivering Better Contact Customer Charter
- (h) Plain Speaking
- (i) Customer Communications
- (j) Darlington Communication Action Charter
- (k) One to One
- (l) Community Partnership Charter
- (m) Civilised Contract
- (n) Council Contract
- (o) For the People

20. The draft Charter has been changed to reflect many of the comments received from both staff and residents.

### **Implementing the Charter**

21. To implement and raise the profile of the Charter the following will be undertaken:

- (a) Managers will undertake staff briefings with staff
- (b) The Communications Unit will raise its profile through the Town Crier, The Flyer and Communication announcements.
- (c) Every member of staff will receive a copy
- (d) The Charter will form an integral part of customer care and induction training
- (e) Posters outlining the key principles of the Charter will be displayed in key reception points.
- (f) Information about the charter will be available on the website

### **Monitoring the Charter**

22. In developing the Charter it is important that we are not only able to monitor the hard targets e.g. response times to telephone calls and letters but also the 'softer side' of customer focus. The 'softer side' of customer focus measures for example how people are dealt with on the telephone and the 'visitor's experience' to establish if staff are welcoming and friendly, was the reception area comfortable etc. To establish customer satisfaction with the 'softer side' of customer focus an annual programme of telephone surveys and face to face interviews will be undertaken by staff within the Connecting with Communities team. A pilot survey is currently being undertaken by the Customer Call and Contact Centre centre. Rather than have a separate monitoring report for the Customer Charter it is suggested that a section be included within the Performance and Finance monitoring report

### **Legal Implications**

23. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

## **Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998**

24. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

## **Council Policy Framework**

25. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework.

## **Decision Deadline**

26. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter.

## **Key Decisions**

27. This is not classed as a key decision and has not been included in the forward plan.

## **Recommendation**

28. It is recommended that Members approve the Customer Charter

## **Reasons**

29. The recommendation is supported to deliver on the Council's agenda to strengthen community engagement by sending a clear message to staff and members of the public what service standards should be delivered in our dealings with the public.

**Lorraine O'Donnell**  
**Assistant Chief Executive**

## **Background Papers**

Institute of Customer Service Customer Charter/Code of Practice

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