DACORUM BOROUGH COUNCIL

Web & Customer Access Strategy second edition, May 2014

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Date of Publication	2011	Date of Last Version	14/04/2014
Version No.	Version 10	Review Date	01/05/16
Associated Documents		Dacorum CSCG Customer Access Delivery Strategy (Northgate) ICT Strategy January 2014 Report to Finance & Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee July 2011	

Summary

Introduction:

The Council is committed to developing a co-ordinated and joined-up approach for customers to access services by a variety of contact channels.

The strategy embeds the principle that customer enquiries are dealt with by staff in a professional and timely manner at the first point of contact and by whichever channel the customer chooses, to agreed standards.

It is clear that some customers still value the traditional delivery channels of interacting directly with a customer service representative; particularly for residents without access to digital channels or those with complex needs. Whilst electronic channels for customer access are becoming increasingly prominent, the more traditional channels of telephone and face to face remain key access options for many customers. Therefore a mix of access channels will be available into the medium term. This mix will change over time as the move to electronic 'self service' channels increases.

The Council's approach will be to work with our partners Northgate to encourage and help customers to move to more effective and efficient means of accessing services. However, to achieve this, the partners will need to build people's confidence, trust and skills in using new access channels.

Our Vision

The proposed model is for service access channels to be built around customer needs and not organisational structures. A model where customers have choice and convenience in the way they interact with the Council, through a multi-channel delivery structure. This will help to ensure that all customers are dealt with quickly and to a consistent quality from any location. This will be done by:

- Using customer insight data to understand our communities and their needs better
- Providing simple and reliable access to accurate and topical information about local services
- Encouraging and enabling people to use the most appropriate ways of contacting the Council.

Key Principles

Any changes in service delivery or shift in access channels must result in service improvement for customers and a greater variety of ways in which to contact the Council. There are a number of principles underlying the Customer Access Strategy. These are:

      a) A recognition that technology is moving very quickly and the Council must be flexible in its approach to two-way information exchange and service delivery;

b) Clear, regular and reliable two-way communication will improve services and reputation and will reduce demand for face-to-face contact and repeat calls;

c) Web transactions will be the council's preferred channel for all direct customer interaction that can reasonably be undertaken electronically;

d) Face to face resources will be freed up for customers who need more bespoke and/or multi-agency support;

e) Avoidable contact will be reduced by opening up a wider range of customer access channels by which customers can self-serve to find the answers to their queries;

f) Operational efficiencies will be achieved through the partnership with Northgate and through back office service developments enabled by the shift to electronic access routes.

Delivery Strategy

1. Northgate have developed a Customer Access Delivery Strategy which sets out how Northgate will deliver the Customer Insight and Channel Shift projects within the CSCG contract. This is attached at Appendix A and forms part of the Council's wider Web and Customer Access Strategy.

2. The Web and Customer Access Strategy has three primary streams by which customers may contact the council:

   - Self-service (Website)
   - Telephone Contact (Contact Centre)
   - Face to Face Contact (Customer Service Centre)

3. The Council will develop in partnership with Northgate a two-way interactive website which will enable people to self-serve through accurate, reliable, fast and convenient web services.

4. The Council will continue to provide assisted access to services through the Council's Contact Centre (telephone/call centre).

5. The Council will continue to manage and maintain the website content to high standards to ensure accessibility, relevance and accuracy.

6. The Council will use the Digital Inclusion project to identify any appropriate required investment in back office systems and infrastructure to support customer access and channel shift.

7. The Digital Inclusion project will include the development of a communications campaign to publicise alternative contact channels.

Web & Customer Access Strategy

"Providing joined up services designed around the needs of the citizen will yield efficiency savings by reducing duplication .... This ought to be the public service aspiration...." *(Varney 2006)*

1. Introduction

This strategy is the Council's plan for the channels it will use to deliver services to, and interact with, its customers. It covers how the Council will, in partnership with Northgate, meet the contact demands of its customers using all the resources it has available as well as striving to improve services and the customer experience whilst reducing contact costs.

The Council aims to provide effective and efficient services to the public whilst achieving value for money. The channels through which public services are delivered and by which the public has contact with the authority, (by telephone, online, in person, or via other means), are an increasingly important part of public service provision.
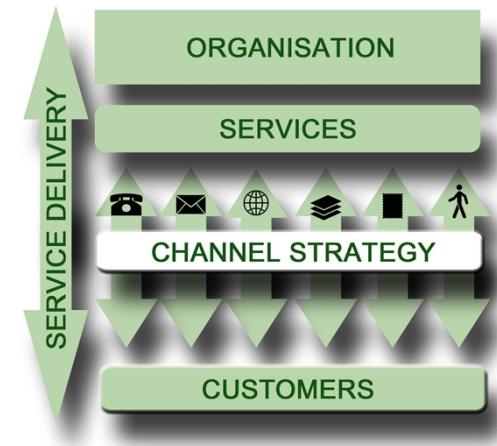
Increased and improved access supports the 'Dacorum Delivers' objective by increasing efficiency of service delivery and also by potentially reducing costs. Information about the costs of various channels is provided below. The strategy can also play a role in 'Building Community Capacity' by building confidence in the use of electronic access channels and enabling greater interaction between residents, thereby reducing isolation.

2. Web and Customer Access Delivery 'as is'

Contact Volumes

Data collated on a national level shows that the web is now the most important access channel for local authorities by volume of enquiries. According to a survey of local authorities in May 2010, 71% of customer interactions[1] came from the website, 19% came from telephone and 10% were face to face.[2]

The table below shows that Dacorum Borough Council is experiencing the same trend: the website attracts a far larger proportion of customer contact than all other access channels. This suggests that the customer appetite for more web transactions may exist.
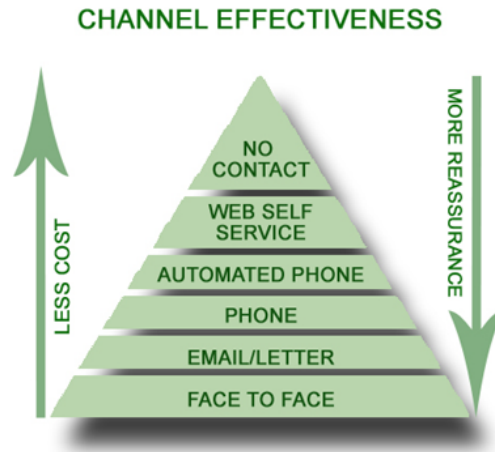
Customer Contact Volumes April 2013 – March 2014 For all customer interaction (% of all contact)	
Face to Face	5
Telephone	20
Autophone	1
Website (All visits)	75

The table below sets out the spread of transactional[3] customer contact across the major access channels. As is evident, telephone contact represented the greatest proportion of customer contact for 2013/14.

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[1] A customer interaction refers to the contact a customer makes when seeking information rather than requesting a specific action.
[2] SOCITM, (August 2010), Customer Access Improvement Service. Data compiled by GovMetric.
[3] Transactional customer contact refers to a customer who is requesting a service. E.G. paying a bill, reporting a missed bin, and requesting a benefits application form.

CHANNEL EFFECTIVENESS

Customer Contact Volumes April 2013 – March 2014	
For all transactional customer contact (% of contact)	
Face to Face	17
Telephone	68
Autophone***	3
Website (web forms only)	12

***Modelled estimate based on 10 months April 2013 – January 2014.*
****Autophone data is only available from December 2013*

Although the web volumes appear to be extremely low, it is important to highlight that these proportions are based solely on the transactions made via the website, for example, reporting a missed bin.

Contact Types

The type of interaction required by customers will be dependent on the type of service they require. As the model below shows, face to face contact is recognised as the channel of choice for customers needing reassurance.

The services which typically demand the highest level of reassurance are benefits and housing. Certainly, the Council's own data supports such a theory as the greatest proportion of customers visiting service centres are customers for Benefits and Housing.

	Customer enquiries by subject at Customer Service Centre	Customer enquiries by telephone
Benefits	29% (2170 visits)	9% (1883 calls)
Housing	25% (1848 visits)	10% (2223 calls)
Payments	23% (1691 visits)	7% (1474 calls)

Information collected by CSU in May 2011

Contact Costs

The table below sets out the cost per customer contact via each of the three primary contact channels. As is evident, the website is by far the cheapest contact medium. It therefore makes economic sense for the Council to continue development of its website so that it is able to facilitate a greater level of customer activity than it currently does.

Contact Channel	Cost per Contact – DBC 2010/11	SOCITM's (2012) Benchmarked cost per contact
Face to Face (per visit)	£7.78	£8.23
Telephone (per call)	£3.01	£3.21
Website (per visit)	£0.29	£0.39

Note: Average costs based on data gathered by SOCITM

Website

As indicated above, there is an increasingly widespread recognition that websites are integral to businesses. The performance and accessibility of a website is heavily affected by its content. Web content further impacts the ability of an organisation to build trust with its customers.

To that end, a great deal of work has taken place over the past three years to improve the functionality of the website. Actions taken include:

- We upgraded the content management system to ensure reliability and to increase functionality; Mobile responsive design was applied to improve functionality for customers;

- Google Analytics was added to monitor web traffic and help identify patterns and trends;

- broken links and spelling errors were removed;

- we have improved the functionality of existing web forms and developed new forms to meet specific service needs;

- accessibility errors for the W3C AA compliance standard were met;

- improvements to web content have begun to improve accuracy, usability and navigation.

Customer Service Centre

The three Customer Service Centres in Dacorum, at Hemel Hempstead, Berkhamsted and Tring, offer access to arrange of Council services including: Benefits; Council Tax; Dacorum Card; Environmental Health; Environmental services; Housing; Planning; Payments. On 5 August 2013, the management of the customer services centres was transferred to Northgate Information Solutions under contract to provide a Customer Service and Contact Gateway (CSCG). This was designed to generate efficiencies while maintaining the service levels through investment in technology and performance management approaches. The contract also accommodated two key projects: the introduction of a Customer Relationship Management System (incorporating the Council's Citizen Insight functions) and Channel Shift. This revised strategy therefore takes account of the project plans for these areas within the overall Service Improvement Plan for the CSCG.

3. Future Plans

Channel Shift

Deliberate channel shift is the design and marketing of effective and efficient channels because they are the most appropriate channels for the type of contact, customer and organisation.

Channel shift forms one part of an overall channel strategy and implemented well it can lower costs, build reputation, empower the citizen and improve the overall service proposition.

Shifting customers to particular channels involves behaviour change on the citizens' part. In theory, once they are aware of the channels that are available, they will use the one that works best for them. However, in practice, choice of access route is influenced not only by awareness, but by past experience, the level of support available and confidence in the efficacy of the channel itself, amongst other factors.

As set out above, DBC currently has a high level of customer contact at the high cost - high reassurance end of the model. The Council recognises that this is most appropriate for some customers and some transactions. However, the Council has yet to realise the full potential of offering other channels to customers. Offering customers a range of options in the way they interact with the Council is considered best practice.

> *"Citizens and businesses will judge the quality of public services they receive by each contact they have with a public sector employee or organisation and in comparison to the services offered by the private sector.... Citizens and businesses increasingly see their time as a limited resource. They rightly demand that their interactions with public services deliver value and that problems are resolved first time"* (Varney 2006)

The future of customer contact should be developed with reference to avoidable contact, digital inclusion and accessibility of contact. Moving forward, these three factors will help the Council to ensure effectiveness of contact and equity of service provision.

Avoidable contact

Avoidable contact is defined as contact with the Council which might be regarded as unnecessary and preventable. Examples of avoidable contact include letters sent out by a service which result in a number of calls to the call centre asking for those letters to be explained. It is a key indication of how well the Council's services are performing. By reducing the level of avoidable contact, the Council will be improving the service to the customer.

In May 2013, the Council published a 'Customer Promise' document setting out minimum standards for contact with customers. This document commits the Council to openness and clarity along with speed of response.

Within the Northgate contract a Media Forum has been extablished. This is a joint forum which will examine the most effective way to develop and manage physical documentation produced by the Authority using a customer-centric approach defined as 'Through the Eyes of the Customer'.

Digital inclusion

Digital exclusion is strongly linked to social exclusion, meaning that the digitally excluded are also likely to have the greatest requirements from public services. Current estimates indicate that over 25% of the East of England's population does not have access to the internet and over 9% of the UK population does not have access to a mobile phone.

National trends indicate that the rate of internet usage is affected by the following factors:

- *Older People* - over 65s are less likely to use the internet. In Dacorum, 16% of the population is aged over 65.[4]

- *Income* – those with higher incomes are most likely to have access to the internet at home. In Dacorum, 7.6% of the working age population claim key out-of-work benefits.[5]

- *Occupation* – those employed in routine or semi routine jobs are less likely to use the internet. In Dacorum, 11% of the working age population work in routine jobs.[6]

- *Qualifications* – only 47% of adults with no formal qualifications are likely to have used the internet, compared with 97% of adults qualified to degree level.[7] In Dacorum, around 10.5% of the working age population has no formal qualifications.[8]

The data above serves as a reminder that customers have a variety of access requirements and that digital channels alone cannot serve the entire community. Retaining face to face and telephone channels is therefore vital to ensure equity of access. It is important for the Council to bear this in mind when moving forward with customer access.

Accessibility of contact Accessibility refers to the ease or difficulty that a citizen may experience whilst using different electronic access channels to obtain services from the Authority. For example, someone with hearing difficulties may find the telephone unusable and may therefore prefer to communicate through e-mail. A customer who does not have English as their first language may not be able to access any contact channel without appropriate translation services.

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[4] Office of National Statistics, 2011 Census data published March 2013 http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-301951

[5] Official Labour Market Statistics, February 2013. Key out of work benefits includes: Job Seekers Allowance, Employment Support and Incapacity Allowance, lone parents and other income related benefits https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157223/report.aspx

[6] Office of National Statistics, Annual Population Survey, February 2013 https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157223/report.aspx#tabempunemp

[7] Office of National Statistics, 2010

[8] Office of National Statistics, Annual Population Survey, Jan 2012 – Dec 2013

In recognizing that our residents have differing requirements with regard to contact, it is essential the Council does not remove any existing access channel. Instead, the improvement of existing contact channels is intended to ensure that access to our services is easily and readily available to all and this principle underpins this strategy.

To identify ways of increasing accessibility and addressing the concerns of those who are not familiar with electronic access channels, a Digital Inclusion project has been established. This forms part of the Dacorum Anywhere programme and will:

- help to identify customer needs
- identify means of supporting services to increase electronic access opportunities
- identify ways of support customers within the community to use electronic channels.

4. Delivery Strategy

This document proposes that the Council ensures that all of the current access channels are further developed, to provide customers with the most effective, efficient and suitable methods by which to make contact. The Northgate Customer Access Delivery Strategy at Appendix A, itemises the work that Northgate will undertake through the CSCG development plans, the Customer Relationship Management (including Citizen Insight) project and the Channel Shift project. The proposals set out below itemise the Council's contribution to delivering improved customer access working in partnership with Northgate.

Self-service (web enabled access)

The Council will make maximum use of its website to enable people to help themselves to our services through accurate, reliable, fast and convenient web services. This will require:

- Reviewing and refreshing content for accessibility and relevance;
- Making on line transactions and applications a priority for business improvement;
- Redesigning services to maximize the use of the web in service delivery; and
- Employing best practice in design and development of our website through investment of appropriate resources.

Telephone Contact (Contact Centre)

The Council will provide access to services through the Contact Centre in accordance with targets agreed within the CSCG contract. These include quantitative measures:

- 70% of calls are answered within 20 seconds (from 5 July 2014 at the latest);
- The rate of abandoned calls is less than 5% (from 5 July 2014)

And qualitative measures based on:

- Govmetric surveys
- Quarterly quality audits by service managers (from August 2014)
- Customer satisfaction surveys undertaken every 6 months.

Face to Face Contact

The Council will provide information and access to all services through local access points in Tring, Berkhamsted and Hemel Hempstead so that:

- Customers will be able to obtain information about all Council services from a local office;
- 70% of customers will wait no longer than 5 minutes to see a Customer Service Representative (from 5 July 2014 at the latest);

That 95% of customers will wait more than 30 minutes to see a representative (from 7 July 2014). The qualitative measures set out under telephone contact above will also apply to face-to-face contact.

Additional delivery proposals

The following steps need to be taken to enable the Council to achieve the aims set out in this strategy:

- Consult with all customer facing services to develop customer access moving forward;

- Cleansing and regular updating of the website content to ensure that it is accurate and relevant;

- A list of FAQs by customers to be produced by each service;

- Back office systems to be analysed to establish back office integration with online transactions; and,

- The customer feedback includes each service actively taking responsibility for following up feedback left by customers.

Strategy Key Actions Plan

The following actions relate to web improvements only. For CSU improvements, please see the Northgate Custom Access Delivery Strategy.

Ref	What	When	Dependency
1	Continue to work with and support services to review and refresh web content	Ongoing	Support from all services
2	Continue to maintain quality and accessibility across the website	Ongoing	Third party tools
3	Develop website customer feedback response process (integrated with CIMS)	Dec 2014	Web team resource
4	Redesign page templates for ease of navigation	August 2014	Web team resource
5	Work through web user journeys (improving customer experience)	Ongoing	Web team resource
6	Complete existing e-form requirements with services and develop next stages	Ongoing – review Dec 2014	Northgate CRM deployment
7	Integrate existing and forthcoming online forms with back office systems where possible, using APIs	TBC	Northgate CRM deployment
8	Develop an online status tracking service for all customer queries (reference numbers to be issued by relevant back office system)	BARTEC – Oct 2014 CIMS Jan 2015 Other services to follow	Back office system functionality
9	Investigate and develop file uploads potential for customer evidence (e.g. grants applications)	April 2014	Web team resource and e-signatures project
10	Develop Voluntary & Community Services directory with public viewing access in partnership with Herts Help	September 2014	Web team/ Community Partnerships/ Central Admin resource
11	Redesign payments portal page using Capita's API	March 2015	Web team resource
12	Personalising website for customers using GIS e.g. postcode lookup for nearest services	TBC	GIS project

13	Using GIS tools to provide localised service availability information to the customer (bin rounds, councillors, play areas, car parks, other public services, etc.)	TBC	GIS project
14	Using GIS to display mapped planning information (e.g. applications, street registers, TPOs, etc.)	TBC	GIS project
15	Investigate mobile app development for service reporting (e.g. on the move environmental issues like flytipping, graffiti, etc.)	TBC	GIS project and Web team resources
16	Investigate a live web chat option to support immediate two-way customer contact	July 2014	Northgate, all customer facing service resource, third party tools
17	Work with Northgate to develop fully integrated customer portal (must link to CRM)	December 2015	Northgate CRM project and back office system functionality

Delivering the plan:

In delivering this plan, it is anticipated that the Council will use the existing resources allocated to the website (in terms of both budget and people).

Where additional third party software is required, there may be some impact on capital and revenue funding and these cost implications will be put through appropriate sign-off process.