

North East Derbyshire District Council

Cabinet

17 December 2014

Customer Service Code of Practice and Standards

**Report No GBXR/26/14/JF of Councillor G Baxter MBE, Portfolio Holder with
Responsibility for Building a Better Council**

This report is public

Purpose of the Report

- To present to Cabinet for approval a joint Customer Service Code of Practice and Standards which demonstrates how both Councils will meet best practice and provide excellent customer service.

1 Report Details

- 1.1 In order to make customer service effective across the Strategic Alliance we have identified the need to review our existing policies and procedures in relation to customer service. The Compliments, Comments and Complaints Policy and Procedure have already been reviewed and approved. This particular report will focus on the Corporate Customer Service Standards.

Background

When North East Derbyshire District Council's Contact Centre opened in 2005, NEDDC adopted the National e-Service Delivery Standards (NeDS) as this was recognised as a mechanism for achieving constant and consistent improvements. This standard consists of a wide range of standards designed not just to improve frontline service delivery but to develop a corporate culture of service excellence and improve the customer experience across the authority. The standards had originally been developed as collaboration between local authority professionals, professional bodies and practising specialists. NEDDC continues to work to these standards currently, however in more recent times these have not been updated nationally and are no longer being developed.

North East Derbyshire District Council currently has a Corporate Customer Charter and a Customer Services and Access Strategy that they work to. In addition to this the Contact Centre has operational standards and PI's. These are reported to the Budget, Finance, Risk and Performance Quarterly Directorate Meetings (BFRP).

Following a review of Customer Services NEDDC no longer deliver any Corporate Customer Service training or have any Customer Service Standards leaflets although the

service booklets and Customer Service Standards incorporate the standards. NEDDC do not currently monitor or report on corporate telephony performance, only Contact Centre telephony performance is reported on.

2 Conclusions and Reasons for Recommendation

- 2.1 To assist and support joint working and standardise procedures across both authorities it would be beneficial to implement and work to one set of Customer Service Standards and Code of Practice. This joint approach has been welcomed by managers delivering joint services to the public.
- 2.2 It may be appropriate timing, with the development of the new Corporate Plan, for North East Derbyshire to consider exploring accreditation against the national Customer Service Excellence standard. This would ensure officers at both Councils are working to the same national standard.
- 2.3 Subject to the Customer Service Code of Practice and Standards in **Appendix 1** being approved the following will be developed:
- One standard Customer Service Standards leaflet with the same look and feel for both authorities.
 - Monitoring and reporting on the same standards will be established with comparable targets set for both authorities.
 - Same sample periods for face to face monitoring set for both authorities, 1 week period twice a year
 - Reporting on performance against the key Customer Service Standards on a quarterly basis to the Budget, Finance, Risk and Performance Quarterly Directorate Meetings (BFRP).
 - Deliver joint mandatory Corporate Customer Service Training in order to ensure consistency of Customer Service across joint services
 - Report on performance against targets on PERFORM and align PI's.

The proposed joint standards and targets are:

Joint Strategic Alliance Corporate Customer Service Standards and Targets	
Service area	Standard
Telephones	Incoming calls to be answered within 20 seconds (5 rings)
Emails	To be acknowledged within 1 working day
Emails	To be replied to within 8 working days
Emails – if the subject is complex and or involves multiple service enquiries	To be replied to within 20 working days

Written communication (letters)	To be replied to within 10 working days
Written communication – Letters or faxes which are complex and or involves multiple service enquiries	To be replied to within a maximum of 20 working days
Face to Face (Contact Centre) excluding appointments	Not to be kept longer than 20 minutes
Face to Face (Contact Centre and departments)	Not to be kept waiting longer than 10 minutes for appointments, Meet & Greet, reception and visitors

These will replace all existing standards.

3 Consultation and Equality Impact

- 3.1 The standards have already been developed by a number of officers in the Customer Service and Improvement Department to ensure that they are fit for purpose. SAMT and SAJC have been consulted.
- 3.2 Data from an external consultation event on the existing Customer Service Standards at Bolsover has been used to form the new standards based on customer feedback.
- 3.3 A joint EIA has been carried out on the revised standards. The standards include equality information.

4 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

- 4.1 In preparing the new standards consideration has been given to providing a consistent approach to customer service across the Strategic Alliance.

5 Implications

5.1 Finance and Risk Implications

- 5.1.1 A review of the standards is required but no finance or risk implications have been identified. Any changes to publicity will be achieved within existing budgets.

5.2 Legal Implications including Data Protection

- 5.2.1 The standards have been reviewed and no legal implications have been identified. The standards are in line with the Data Protection Act 1998.

5.3 Human Resource Implications

- 5.3.1 Once the revised standards have been approved all revised standards and documentation will be made available on the intranet for staff. Briefings will be

delivered for internal staff and mandatory training for all new employees will be introduced.

5.3.2 The standards will be monitored and reported within existing staffing resources.

6 Recommendation

6.1 That Cabinet approve the joint Customer Service Code of Practice and Standards.

7 Decision Information

Is the decision a Key Decision? (A Key Decision is one which results in income or expenditure to the Council of £50,000 or more or which has a significant impact on two or more District wards)	No
District Wards Affected	Not applicable
Links to Corporate Plan priorities or Policy Framework	NEDDC – High Performing Council

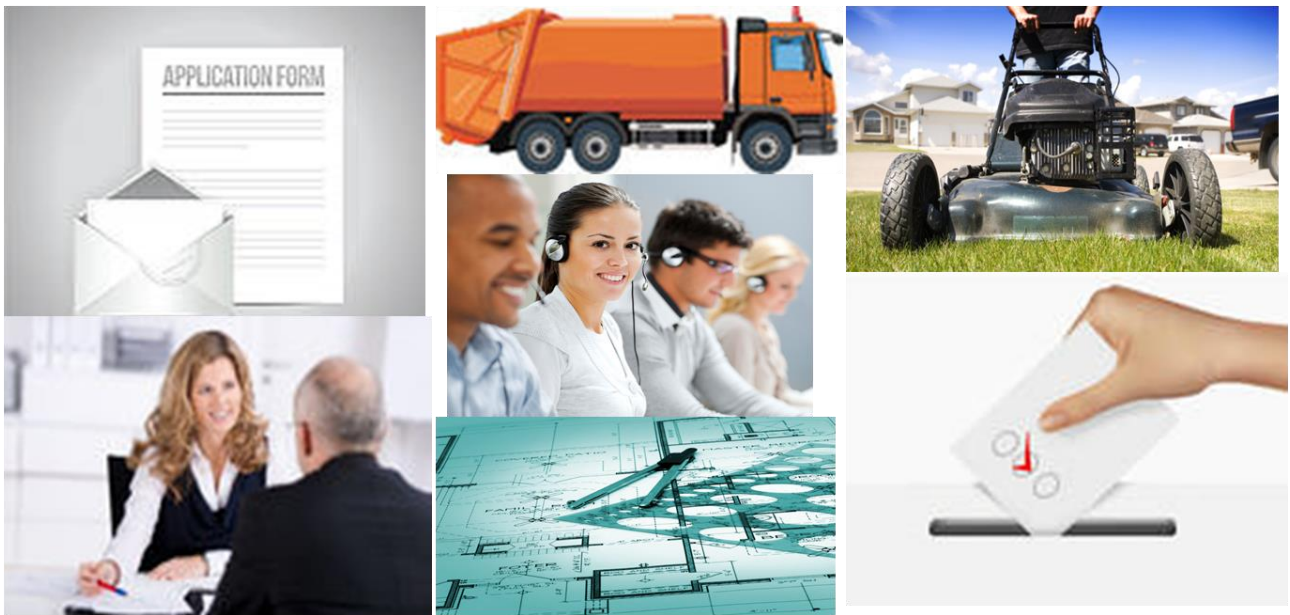
8 Document Information

Appendix No	Title
1	Customer Service Code of Practice and Standards
Background Papers (These are unpublished works which have been relied on to a material extent when preparing the report. They must be listed in the section below. If the report is going to Cabinet (NEDDC) or Executive (BDC) you must provide copies of the background papers)	
Not applicable	
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05/11/2014

Customer Service

Code of Practice and Standards



May 2014

Customer Service Code of Practice and Standards

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Introduction

Endorsement from the Chief Executive

First impressions count. And this is no more relevant than in local government. How customers feel about us is often a result of the experience they receive when they first make contact.

Customers often change their opinion of a business after they contact them, so more often than not it is the first point of contact with a company that influences the way customers think about a business. A bad experience or impression can lead to a long lasting negative association with that company. That's why we have, and will continue to invest in providing good quality customer service.

Our employees receive constant training on all levels of customer service and how to deal with any problems or issues fairly, consistently and in an understanding, professional and courteous manner.

Our ultimate aim is to '*serve our customers as we would wish to be served*' and this underlying principle runs right through our organisations.

The Customer Service Standards outlined in this document reflect this and outline what level of service our customers can expect from us and in turn what we expect from them.

So, no matter whether a customer contacts us by phone, e-mail, through social media, letter or in person they know exactly what service they will get.

What is Customer Service?

Customer Service is ensuring that we give our customers the level of quality of personal service to allow our customers to be served as we would wish to be served ourselves.

Our customers have a right to expect the best possible standards of services from us. Our customers should be treated with respect, listened and responded to in a polite, helpful and timely manner.

Our aim is to bring your reason for contacting us to a satisfactory conclusion as often as possible when you first contact us.

Why does the Council need a Code of Practice and Standards?

There is already a lot of good customer service practice within both Bolsover District Council (BDC) and North East Derbyshire District Council (NEDDC). There is, however, a need to formalise this good practice ensuring that the principles are embraced and adopted by all employees across the Strategic Alliance. This will enable us to respond to and communicate with our customers in a consistent manner, no matter whom they contact.

The Government is committed to improving and modernising public services and is keen for us to provide high standards of customer service to citizens. Both Councils have identified providing excellent customer focused services as one of its key aims in their Corporate Plans and as essential to improving performance more generally.

This Code of Practice sets out the way in which we deal with customers by telephone, letter, face to face, e-mail, and other forms of communication.

Who are our Customers?

Our customers are all the people and organisations for whom we provide a service. This includes residents, visitors, businesses and partnership organisations.

It is important to note that **internal colleagues** serving these groups are also customers.

Standards, Targets and Performance Measures

What are Standards, Targets and Performance Measures?

This document sets out the customer service standards for the Council.

Standards are the promises that we make to service users about the level and quality of service they can expect.

Example: 'We promise to answer all letters within 10 working days'.

Targets are commitments that are made in advance to achieve a stated level of service.

Example: 'We aim to meet the standard to answer all letters within 10 working days'.

Performance Measures are systems to collect data that demonstrate how well a standard is being achieved or whether a target is being met.

Example: 'This year we answered 85% of all letters within 10 working days'.

A number of standards have been established as key ones and are monitored and reported upon quarterly to the relevant officer and Elected Member Groups. Our customer service standards are:

BDC and NEDDC Joint Customer Service Standards	
Telephones	Incoming calls to be answered within 20 seconds (5 rings)
E-mails	To be acknowledged within one working day
E-mails	To be answered within 8 working days or, if the subject is complex or crosscutting several departments, a maximum* of 20 working days
Formal Investigation (stage two complaint)	To be answered within 15 working days
Internal Review (stage three complaint)	To be answered within 20 working days
Written communication	To be answered within 10 working days or if the subject is complex or crosscutting several departments, a maximum* of 20 working days
Face to Face (Contact Centre) excluding	Not to be kept longer than 20 minutes

appointments	
Face to Face (Contact Centre and departments)	Not to be kept waiting longer than 10 minutes for appointments, Meet & Greet, reception and visitors

The 'softer' aspects of the customer service standards such as courtesy and helpfulness are monitored and measured through quality monitoring and customer satisfaction surveys.

*The Local Government Ombudsman acknowledges that 20 working days is acceptable in complex cases.

Customer Service Code of Practice

Our Promise to our Customers

Elected Members and Officers are committed to providing a first class service to the residents and businesses of Bolsover District Council and North East Derbyshire District Council. Our promise is to provide you with the best possible experience however you choose to get in touch with us when you require our services. We recognise our duty to deal with all our customers fairly and value their diversity. You are at the heart of everything we do.

When customers make contact with us we will:

• Be welcoming and courteous
• Be polite, fair and respectful
• Be helpful and responsive
• Provide good quality information suited to their needs
• Communicate clearly
• Advise what we can provide, who to contact and how
• Advise how to use the compliments, comments and complaints system to improve our services
• Keep them informed of the actions we have take and not make false promises
• Empathise and listen to understand their needs
• Have knowledgeable staff to deal with their enquiry
• Treat all information received in the strictest of confidence

To help us achieve this we ask that customers:

• Are courteous and respectful towards us
• Provide accurate information when required
• Make suggestions on improving our services by using the compliments, comments and complaints system
• Ask us to explain anything they are not sure of
• Advise us of any specific requirements, e.g. large print, Braille etc.

In addition:

- All employees need to work within the Corporate Policy for Access to Information (Data Protection, Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Regulations)

- The Data Protection Act 1998 requires that any information we keep about our customers must be accurate, up-to-date, and relevant. Information must only be used for which it was obtained and not disclosed to anyone except those noted in the registration
- The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives a general right of access to recorded information held by the Council, subject to certain conditions and exemptions contained in the Act. Any person making a request for information is entitled to be informed in writing whether the Council holds the information and if it does to have that information communicated to them
- The Council is committed to equalities as an employer and in all the services provided to all sections of the community. The Council believes that no person should be treated unfairly and is committed to eliminate all forms of discrimination in compliance with its policies in line with the Single Equality Scheme. The Council also has due regard to proactively promote equality of opportunity and good relations between different groups in society when performing its functions.

Customer Service Standards

A. Customer Service Standards for Management of Reception Areas

First impressions are always important, and reception areas are the first place that a customer sees. We aim to give a business-like appearance and a warm welcome.

Our standards are:

Housekeeping and Information

You should:

- Keep all reception areas clean, tidy and safe e.g. keep walkways clear in line with Health and Safety Policy
- Keep publicity displays and leaflets tidy and up-to-date
- Take into account those who require mobility scooter, wheelchair or pushchair access
- Make sure information is available in other formats, if required
- Try not to leave the reception area unattended. However, if you do need to for any reason, display an appropriate notice
- Use large lettering on signs, with good colour contrast e.g. black print on pastel shades, such as lemon
- Replace worn or damaged documents with new copies
- Try not to display posters on glassed surfaces
- Keep glass screens clear to enable people to lip-read
- Ensure that key documents, such as the compliments, comments and complaints booklet and customer service standards leaflet are displayed in prominent positions in reception areas
- Offer to help if a customer is having difficulty in filling in a form

- Always give the customer any useful information that will help resolve their problem or assist them in filling in a form
- Offer the customer the use of a private interview room if considered appropriate to the enquiry or situation
- Provide a loop system for the hard of hearing and, where appropriate, train staff in British Sign Language.

B. Telephone Customer Service Standards

The Contact Centre Service provides a frontline service, managing telephone calls, e-mails and enquiries for a number of Council Departments. The service ensures that enquiries are responded to in a timely manner, are recorded on the appropriate systems and provide an audit trail of contact, if required.

Where appropriate, the corporate Contact Centre telephone number should be used on all general external communications to the public i.e. leaflets, newspaper articles, web pages, unless the department does not use the Contact Centre to provide their frontline service. In this case please ensure that the telephone number quoted is accurate and there is adequate cover to manage calls.

These are the minimum standards the Council aims to achieve when you answer the telephone. You should:

- Aim to answer within 20 seconds or 5 rings
- Use a greeting such as “Good morning/afternoon” to give the caller the opportunity to get accustomed to your voice and pace, but keep the introduction short and concise
- Identify your department/section
- Identify yourself early in the conversation
- If the caller is asking for personal information about themselves, such as financial information, please ask them to confirm some details about themselves – full name, address, reference numbers etc. If in doubt, advise you will call them back with the information
- Use clear, positive language and not use jargon
- Listen carefully to what is being said and summarise the conversation for clarification at relevant points
- Use the caller’s name, if appropriate, it conveys a friendly approach
- At the end of the conversation ask the customer if there is anything else you can help them with and confirm your name as the Officer they have been dealing with
- If providing further information ask what method suits them, for example, by e-mail, through the website

- If transferring a call, introduce the caller to the relevant department, passing on the information already given
- Offer to ring the caller back to avoid the caller being left on hold for a long period
- When transferring, if appropriate and where voicemail is available, check the inbox message for when the Officer is back in the office, explain the situation and give contact details on how to leave a voice message.

Please see the Call Handling (including telephone answer machine service) Procedure at Appendix A.

Messages

When someone makes a call, there is nothing more frustrating than a telephone that is not answered or one that is answered but the person on the other end cannot help and tells you to ring back.

If you are going to be away from your work area for some time, you should:

- Let team members know where you will be, how you can be contacted, and when you are likely to be back
- Make arrangements where possible for calls to be redirected to someone who can take a message
- On your return to work, ensure calls are returned within 1 working day where practically possible
- Activate the answer service when away from the office for any extended period, for instance, leave, business absence
- If you take a message for someone else:
 - Make sure it is clear and concise. Take a note of the caller's name, organisation/department, telephone number, date, time, and when the caller is available to receive the return call
 - Be prepared to slow the caller down and ask for difficult spellings or points to be repeated
 - Repeat the message back
 - Don't make promises for other people unless you are certain they can keep them.

Answer Services

Telephone answering machines should only be used when no one else is available to take messages and staff are away from their work area. Where answer services are approved and provided the following standards apply:

- Answer machines should only be switched on when staff leave their work area and at the end of each working day
- Answer machines must be switched off when Officers are back in their work area

- Answer machines must contain a greeting and a clear message about whose answer phone has been reached
- The message should contain an alternative number in case of emergency
- Answer machines must be checked daily. See Appendix A.

C. Customer Service Standards for Written Communication

Written communication can take a variety of forms and we need to ensure that we answer appropriately and professionally whether it is an e-mail, letter or facsimile (fax).

Performance standards have been established for how quickly we should respond to different forms of written communication. Where mail can be responded to sooner, all efforts should be made to do so.

Examples of written communication would be requests for service, benefit entitlement queries, requests for assisted bin collections etc.

Compliments, Comments and Complaints and requests for information made under the Data Protection Act 1998, Freedom of Information Act 2000 and Environmental Information Regulations 2004 are dealt with corporately and fall under separate procedures with their own timescales. Please refer to the relevant policies.

If a reply requires information from more than one department and falls outside of the scope of the Compliments, Comments and Complaints Policy or outside of Freedom of Information/ Data Protection Request Procedures, the lead department (the department who has received the enquiry or is responsible for the main content) should assess how best to manage the reply and adopt one of the following approaches:

- For the lead department to obtain the required information from other departments and to include in their reply. (This approach should be suitable for enquiries requiring input from two departments)
- For the lead department to note in their reply that the enquiry has also been passed to X departments for their attention and provide a name and telephone number for contact. (This is the minimum standard and should only be used when the first option is not considered appropriate by the lead department).

Wherever possible to provide the customer with one reply which covers all the points raised.

E-mail

E-mail is often seen as informal, which is fine for when we are using our own computers at home. However, in the course of providing our services and undertaking our duties all e-mail correspondence will be treated with the same attention to customer service as with other forms of communication. The standard includes the use of iPads and mobiles telephones which have the facility to send and receive e-mails.

You should:

- Acknowledge all enquiries by the public within one working day, if unable to respond fully within one working day. Automated e-mail responses are acceptable and will suffice for when away from your desk for more than a day. It is important that a professional message is left with contact details for those enquirers who cannot wait until you return to pick up your messages. The message should advise the period for which you will be missing, when you will be back at your desk, who to contact in your absence and your name and job title. The 'Out of Office Assistant' needs to be used for this purpose on Outlook
- Answer e-mail enquiries in full within eight working days. For responses requiring more information, keep the customer informed about when to expect a full response
- Ensure that all responses by e-mail are professionally written and:
 - Include a greeting e.g. Dear/Good morning/ Good afternoon
 - Include the enquirer's name, if known
 - Include some form of ending e.g. please contact me if you require further assistance
 - Be typed in basic text using black Arial 12 point and typed in the same case format as used in letters
 - Bear the reader in mind. Use several paragraphs for longer responses, it is easier to read
 - Include an ending as appropriate, e.g. Yours sincerely/ Yours faithfully/ Regards
 - Include a signature in accordance with the corporate layout as follows:

Internal E-mail

Name
 Job Title
 Ext: extension number
 Mob: mobile number, if applicable
 e-mail: name@council.gov.uk

External E-mail

Name
 Job Title
 Department
 Name of Council
 Address of office base
 Tel: 01XXX XXXXXX
 Mobile: If applicable
 e-mail: e-mail or service@council.gov.uk

- The corporate or departmental e-mail address to be used on all general external communications to the public i.e. leaflets, newspaper articles, web pages. The use of the corporate e-mail address enables all e-mail enquiries to be managed centrally by the Contact Centre service and reported on for adherence to the customer service standards for e-mail contact by the Customer Service and Improvement Department.

See Appendix E for an example of how to layout an e-mail.

E-mail is no different from any other form of communication and makes the same binding commitments. The Councils have a policy on the use of the Internet and e-mail, which can be found on the Councils' Intranets.

Where there is an ongoing case, there is no requirement to acknowledge each and every e-mail correspondence within one working day. However, in a small number of cases, customers may seek to prolong dialogue with Officers via e-mail, raising different issues or asking for information after their enquiry has been fully dealt with. In these cases you may wish to seek advice on how to proceed with the enquiry, as it may be better dealt with through another process, such as a comment or complaint or Information Request. These procedures have a different timescale to 'enquiry e-mails' and as such, you should forward them to the relevant Officers responsible for these procedures.

Absence

If the addressee is not available to respond to their e-mail due to absence, provision must be made to deal with that person's e-mail for the time they are absent, or an alternative contact given for the period of their absence. If a reply is not going to be sent within 8 working days:

- An acknowledgement should be sent within 3 working days
- The customer should be notified of when to expect a response.

Please see sample out-of-office e-mail message at Appendix E.

Redirecting e-mail

If you do not know who you should direct an e-mail to, you should:

- Use the global distribution address list on Outlook

If you need to refer to another department, e-mail the customer back and say: Further to your recent enquiry. . . (then advise them you have passed on their enquiry to:)

- Give the name of the department
- Give the name of the person within that department
- Give a telephone number for that person
- Advise them if they require any further assistance please don't hesitate to ask

End the e-mail with appropriate ending either:

- Regards
- Yours sincerely
- Yours faithfully

Confidential e-mail

If there is any doubt about whether a reply would remain confidential to the recipient, for instance if the name of the e-mail recipient is not the name of the customer, it may be more appropriate to send a letter.

Confidential e-mails should be 'flagged' appropriately. Please note though, e-mails flagged in this way does not make them exempt from release under Data Protection or Freedom of Information legislation.

E-mail Security

Each new PC user is made aware of the computer guidance which is available on the Councils' Intranets at their induction. This contains information about ICT security together with guidelines on the use of e-mail and the Internet. Users are required to abide by these guidelines.

Employees should be cautious when accepting e-mail from unknown sources and alert the ICT Department if unsure. Any suspicious e-mails should just be deleted, there is no need to report to ICT. Virus detection is undertaken for all incoming and outgoing e-mail, including attachments, but nothing is 100% secure.

Social Media

Social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, are another customer service channel used by the Council. Social Media is instant and therefore any comments (legitimate or not) made via this medium can create a significant amount of interest and be widespread in minutes. They should therefore be addressed as soon as is practicable to minimise any harm or mis-information these cause.

Consequently, the Council's Communications Officer monitors and manages requests for service, compliments, comments and informal (frontline resolution) complaints via these channels. Social media should not be used for formal investigations (stage two) or internal review (stage three) complaints due to the level of detail required in order to investigate (please see Compliments, Comments and Complaints policy). Customers wishing to make a formal complaint will be directed to the electronic complaints form.

When responding to the Communications Officer about a social media comment, you should provide the same level of detail as you would ordinarily do when responding to a telephone call, e-mail or letter. It is recognised that you may require some further information and you should advise the Communications Officer of what information you require.

Letters

Incoming letters should be date stamped when received and passed on to the addressee or appropriate person within 1 working day where practically possible.

Incoming letters flagged as 'Private and Confidential' should be opened by the addressee only. However, Executive Directors and Assistant Directors can nominate a named delegated person to open such letters in their absence.

Outgoing letters should:

- Be typed on standard letterheaded paper
- Contain a telephone contact number and an e-mail address. Consideration needs to be given to the contact details provided, follow up enquiries from the public may be served better if directed to a generic team number or e-mail address

- Be typed using Arial 12 point (unless a disk, digital/CD, large print or Braille copy is asked for)
- Quote any references.

See Appendix D for an example of how to layout a letter.

Confidential Letters

If an item of correspondence is confidential, then this must be written on the letter and on the envelope, if a window envelope is not being used.

Style Guide

Both BDC and NEDDC set out how to use their logo and icons in its corporate style guide, which is available on the Council's Intranets.

Facsimile (Fax)

Although the numbers of faxes received are dwindling, when sending a fax, you should:

- Send a cover sheet containing the appropriate logo, date, address, telephone number and fax number
- Include the name, organisation, department and fax number of the person receiving it
- State the number of pages being faxed (including the front sheet) and any message or action to be taken. If necessary, the fax front sheet should be signed.

See Appendix C for a copy of the Corporate Fax Front Sheet.

When responding to letters or faxes you should:

- Reply within **10 working days**
- Produce the reply and supporting documents in an appropriate format where necessary, for example, large print (see Appendix B)
- Reply to an enquiry using the community language within which it was received (see Appendix B)
- Reply in plain, jargon free language
- Be accurate, especially when using or referring to names
- Give consideration to the telephone number quoted at the top of the letter, follow up enquiries from the general public may be better served if routed to a generic team
- Use a salutation which is appropriate to the degree of formality required and to the ethnic origin of the respondent
- Include a subject/heading
- Include a 'signature' with the name and job title of the person responding

- Include a closing statement, which tells the customer what to do if they require further assistance
- Check the grammar and the spelling before sending.

If a reply requires detailed information or translation, you should:

- Acknowledge the enquiry within 3 working days and keep the customer informed about when to expect a full response
- Send a detailed response, preferably within a maximum **20 working days**.

Please note: It is important at all times to keep the customer informed about their enquiry.

Absence

If the addressee is not available to respond to their mail due to absence, provision should be made to deal with that person's mail for the time they are absent. If a reply is not going to be sent within 10 working days:

- An acknowledgement should be sent within 3 working days
- The customer should be notified of when to expect a response.

Redirecting Mail

Sometimes it is necessary to redirect mail as customers may be unsure where to send mail. It is poor customer service to move documents around the Council without dealing with them effectively, if unsure please seek information from Customer Services.

If mail needs to be redirected, you should:

- Make every effort to find the right addressee
- Aim to do so within 1 working day where practically possible
- Check that the person is the correct recipient and that you have their correct contact information
- Include an explanation on the redirected correspondence saying from where and to whom it has been sent
- In the cases of redirected mail for outside of the Council, send an explanation to the customer stating what action you have taken, together with the name and contact details of the person who is dealing with the enquiry.

Short Messaging Service (SMS) Text Messaging

Where this is used we will:

- Acknowledge your text within 1 working day

- Pass your query to an Officer/ the appropriate department to deal with
- Deal with service requests and queries within the appropriate service standard.

The Council's Website

The website is an information portal that is available 24 hours a day. In this 'on-demand' society, users need to know that the information contained on the site is accurate and up to date. The website should be designed to meet accessibility standards, be written in clear, plain English and be readily available, with options to request more information or a specific service (i.e. report dog fouling or a missed bin collection).

The website is an ever-changing communication tool and it's important that it keeps pace with new technology and provides customers with the information they need, regardless of what device or technology they are using.

Regular monitoring of the website is undertaken by the Communications Officer to make sure the information is correct, up to date and provided in a timely manner.

D. Face to Face Customer Service Standards

Greeting Customers and Dealing with Enquiries

When visiting the Council, customers should be treated with respect and in accordance with their needs, which will vary from customer to customer. This type of personal service is important if we are to ensure that all customers receive equal access to services whatever their needs. Reception areas should be designed or laid out in such a way that it is clear to the customer where to go and what assistance can be sought.

See Appendix B for information on access facilities.

When dealing with customers at the first point of contact, you should:

- Be appropriately dressed (e.g. standard issue uniform for Contact Centre and Leisure Centre staff) and always wear a name badge or identity card as appropriate
- Aim to greet or at least acknowledge customers (eye contact, smile etc.) as soon as they enter the building or approach a reception or enquiry desk/ employee
- Speak clearly and face the customer
- Make customers feel welcome and find out how they can be helped
- Address the customer appropriately, for example, 'Mrs Jones'. Words such as 'duck', 'love', 'dear' and 'mate' are not appropriate and should not be used to address the customer
- If the customer needs an interpreter, make the necessary arrangements (see Appendix B)
- **Not keep customers waiting more than 20 minutes to be served** at an enquiry desk
- **Not keep customers waiting more than 20 minutes** once they have made an initial contact at an enquiry desk and need to be seen by an officer. If this is not possible, they should be given the option of waiting until they can be seen or making a specific appointment
- Deal with all enquiries politely and helpfully

- Listen and consider the situation from the customer's perspective (empathise)
- Treat the customer according to their needs. (Appendix B provides information on access facilities)
- Avoid arguments with members of the public
- Not criticise the council, your colleagues or other sections to customers – it gives a bad impression and in the customers' eyes you are the council
- Close the enquiry by asking whether there is anything else you can help them with.

If the personal caller is being abusive or aggressive, you should:

- Stay calm and be mindful of your body language
- Give them an opportunity to state their case – do not interrupt or finish their sentences as this can often inflame the situation - before advising that you will try and do what you can to help
- Encourage them to use a private interview room (preferably secure) so that the customer and you are free from distractions. If a secure interview room is not available then make a judgement as to remain in a public area or to be accompanied by a colleague in an open interview room
- Recognise when someone is swearing because they are frustrated rather than swearing at you as an individual
- If the customer continues to be abusive, explain firmly but politely that you are finding their behaviour to be abusive. Give them an opportunity to calm down and resume the conversation in an appropriate manner
- If the customer continues to be abusive, advise that you are going to refer the matter to your supervisor/line manager
- If at any point in time you feel threatened or in any danger then use the panic buttons where available and/or remove yourself from the situation
- If the customer advises that they are recording the interview, proceed only if you feel comfortable in doing so. If not, terminate the interview by advising that you will be seeking clarification from your line manager
- Gain assistance from colleagues as required, make a file note of what has happened, whilst still fresh in your memory, and report the incident promptly to your line manager, for escalating through the Employee Protection Procedure.

Appointments

If the customer has an appointment Customer Advisors should:

- Make the member of staff aware that the customer has arrived
- Ask the customer to take a seat if they are waiting to attend an appointment with another member of staff and they are delayed

- Tell the customer the reason for any delay
- **Not keep customers waiting more than 10 minutes.**

If for any reason staff are unable to keep an appointment, you should:

- Make arrangements for the customer to be seen by someone else
- Or, make another appointment where practically possible.

Private Interviews

If the customer requests a private interview, you should:

- Conduct the interview in an interview room with a panic button, where available. If you do not feel comfortable giving the customer a private interview on your own, ask your supervisor/manager for assistance
- Not continue to discuss the customer's private case details in front of other customers or members of staff
- Advise the customer if an interview room is not available and offer them the choice of waiting or making an appointment to return.

Home/Place of Work Visits

In certain circumstances Council Officers will visit a person's home or place of work. You should:

- Be appropriately dressed and always wear a name badge or identity card as appropriate
- Let colleagues know where you are and when you will be back
- Check the Employee Protection Register if applicable
- Make sure you have an appointment where appropriate, and present an identity badge
- Fully explain the reason for the visit to their home/business
- Treat customers and members of the household/business and their property with respect
- If the customer is not at home, leave a card with contact details saying that you have called
- Be sensitive to and try to observe different customs
- Not make personal remarks about the customers' home

- If the customer asks you a question that you cannot answer, give them the name of the person at the Council who will be able to help them or find the information on their behalf and get back to them
- If there is paperwork to complete, go through this and explain what is needed
- When your visit is complete, summarise the visit and its outcome. If you promise to do something – **do it!** If there are any difficulties or outstanding issues, keep the customer fully informed. Where appropriate, follow up your visit with a letter to the customer confirming what you agreed during your visit
- Not smoke – in line with the Council's 'No Smoking Policy'
- If at any point you feel uncomfortable or threatened, leave the premises.

When driving on Council business, you should:

- Drive in a safe and responsible manner and within the legal requirements, for example, speed limits, use of mobile phones
- Park in appropriate places
- Not smoke – in line with the Council's 'No Smoking Policy' for company vehicles.

Gaining Customer Feedback

Consultation

In order to check how good our customer service is from the customer's point of view, it is important to gain feedback using consultation.

A variety of mechanisms are available for obtaining customer feedback. These include:

- Citizens' Panel – 1000 people age 18 and over from across the District representative of the location, age and gender distribution of residents
- Satisfaction Surveys – many services routinely conduct surveys of service users to gauge their levels of satisfaction
- Customer Compliments, Comments and Complaints – made whilst receiving services, on the Compliments, Comments and Complaints form, through consultation exercises or on the Council's website.

The Councils have a variety of tools to provide guidance and best practice on who and how to consult. The Councils employ a User Engagement Officer at Bolsover District Council who can be contacted on 01246 242300 and a Community Involvement Officer at North East Derbyshire District Council who can be contacted on 01246 217018 for advice and information regarding consultation.

Appendices

The following Appendices have been provided as a means of supporting the Code of Practice and Standards.

Appendix A	Call Handling (including telephone answer machine service) Procedure
Appendix B	Disability Information and Access Facilities
Appendix C	Fax Cover Sheet
Appendix D	Standard Layout for Letters
Appendix E	Standard Layout for E-mails

Appendix A - Call Handling (including telephone answer machine service) Procedure

1. Answering Calls

Our protocol for answering calls is to include a greeting, introduction and query as to the nature of the call. You should include the following:

- a. Good morning/ afternoon, [name of department], this is [name] speaking, how can I help you?
- b. Ask for the name, address and telephone number and any other relevant details from the caller
- c. After taking all the details, whilst being polite with the customer, summarise the call and ask if there is anything else you can help them with.

2. Transferring a Call

Customers may simply need to be transferred to another department or section, consequently when passing callers through to another department, you should:

- a. Advise the customer that they are being transferred and who to
- b. Introduce the caller to the department transferred to and why they are calling (this gives the recipient the opportunity to advise if they are the correct person to take the call)
- c. If the call is not transferred, or is taking a long time, reclaim the call
- d. If the extension number has voice mail activated, check to see if the message explains when the officer will be back in the office/available, reclaim the call and explain the situation and ask if they would like to leave an answer phone message – if they do transfer the call.

Do not keep callers on hold for long periods – ensure you reclaim the call and explain you are having difficulties connecting them to an appropriate/specific person. Offer to take a number and call them back if you cannot easily find out who the call should be directed to.

Remember to keep the caller informed, let them know you are still there and trying to help and give them the opportunity to change their mind.

Contact Centres have their own procedures for handling calls.

Ending the Call

- Ask if there is anything else you can help the caller with
- Thank them for their call
- Sign the call off with a 'goodbye'.

3. Answering Machines/Services

Where appropriate, some Officers use an answering machine/service to capture calls whilst out of the office. Messages must contain a greeting and a clear message about whose answer phone has been reached.

For example:

*"You are through to the * Department/Section. This is * (Name). I'm sorry but I'm not available at the moment. If you wish to leave a message, please do so after the tone and I'll call you back as soon as I can."*

Answer services must contain an additional message if staff are likely to be away from the office for more than one day. The message should be re-recorded to reflect this.

For example:

*"I will be away from the office until * (day and date)."*

Alternatively, if staff are likely to be away from the office for more than one working day, arrangements could be made for answer service messages to be checked and acknowledged by a colleague. Answer phone messages should contain a more detailed message if on leave, include a return to work date and contain a message where possible informing the caller of an alternative number.

For example:

*"I'm sorry but I'm not available until * (date). If you need to speak to someone urgently, please re-dial and ask to be put through to * (Name) or ring the direct number 01246 2****. Thank you."*

Answer service messages must be checked upon return to the work area and messages acknowledged within 1 working day where practically possible.

Other issues for consideration:

- Answer services must be checked regularly to ensure they are in working order.
- If a member of staff with an answer service is off sick the telephone must be diverted to another phone or messages taken off the machine regularly and customer messages acknowledged.

- Speaker volumes should be kept low when playing back messages to minimise disruption to colleagues and to ensure customer confidentiality/data protection is not breached.

Anonymous Callers

Some customers may elect to remain anonymous. Whilst we will respect their decision to do so, we may need to point out any restrictions this may cause us in trying to resolve the matter, for example, unable to provide feedback or request further information at a later date.

Bomb Threat Calls

Whilst a rare occurrence, employees will need to be alert to bomb threat or other security threat calls. Please refer to the Bomb Threat Procedure on the Intranet and alert your direct line manager as soon as the call is complete.

Dealing with Difficult or Abusive Callers

There are many reasons why callers may be angry or frustrated. It is important to try to diffuse the situation by listening to what the customer has to say and apologise where appropriate. The Council does not expect and will not tolerate employees having to suffer abusive or aggressive behaviour from customers. It is recognised that individuals have different levels of tolerance and therefore the decision about whether a customer is being abusive or aggressive has to be made by the employee concerned. Employees should be confident that a decision made by them as to whether a caller is abusive will be supported by the Council. Specific guidance is noted below and under Face to Face Customer Service Standards.

If the caller is being abusive or aggressive, you should:

- Stay calm and do not raise your voice
- Recognise when someone is swearing because they are frustrated, rather than swearing at you as an individual
- Try to explain that you will do your best to sort out their problem
- Give them an opportunity to state their case, do not interrupt or finish their sentences as this can often inflame the situation, before advising that you want to try and help and to do so you need to get certain details
- If the caller continues to shout or be abusive, explain that this behaviour is making it difficult for you to sort their problem out and it will help if they can calm down and give the details you require
- If they continue to be abusive explain firmly but politely that you are not required to listen to such language or suffer such abuse and give them an opportunity to calm down and resume the conversation in an appropriate manner
- If they still continue to be abusive explain firmly but politely that you will be ending the conversation by putting the telephone down

- If you feel disturbed or anxious following the call, make sure you take some time away from the telephone to compose yourself
- If a caller advises that they are recording their call, proceed with the call only if you feel comfortable in doing so. If not, terminate the call by advising that you will be seeking clarification from your line manager
- Gain assistance from colleagues as required, make a file note of what has happened, whilst still fresh in your memory, and report the incident promptly to your line manager, for escalating through the Employee Protection Procedure.

4. When Making a Call

Our protocol when making calls is to include a greeting, introduction and to include the reason for your call. Please be mindful that, especially if calling a mobile number or work contact number, it may not be convenient for the recipient to accept the call. You should include the following:

- a) Good morning/ afternoon, this is [name] from [name of department] [name of Council] speaking
- b) Advise of the nature of your call
- c) Ask if it convenient for them to take the call, if it is a mobile or work contact number.

Appendix B – Disability Information and Access Facilities

Access statement

To make our services and documentation accessible to all, both Councils provide the following services:

Staff Assistance

If any customer has difficulty in reading or understanding a council document then a member of staff can go through the document with the customer at the office or at their home, if that is more appropriate. Alternatively, the document could be produced in a more suitable format, see below for details.

Braille, Large Print and Digital Copies

Documents can be produced in other formats, if requested. Producing documents in a larger print size which have been created internally can usually be managed by the person/service receiving the request. Guidance should be sought from the respective Council's Equality lead Officer. It is important to let the customer know how long it is going to take to produce the required format and to keep them informed of developments, if necessary.

Induction Loops

Induction loops assist deaf or hard of hearing people to hear speech, they replace the sound path between the sound source and the listener with an inductive signal that is not affected by acoustics or other sounds. It is a cable that encircles the audience area e.g. enquiry desk and is fed by a loop amplifier. This gets its signal from a microphone placed in front of the person speaking. The resulting electric current in the loop produces a magnetic field corresponding to the speaker's voice. The listener uses their hearing aid to convert the signal back to sound. The system helps users to hear from anywhere covered by the system. The sound that people hear without a receiver is unaffected.

Translation and Interpretation Services

The Council subscribes to an interpreter service over the telephone or face-to-face, if required. Guidelines on how to use this service have been produced and can be accessed via the respective Council's Equality lead Officer, the Contact Centres and on the relevant Council's Intranet.

There are also a number of organisations who provide translation services. If a document requires translation then please contact the respective Council's Equality lead Officer for advice.

The Equality lead Officer is available for information and advice regarding access facilities. Please contact the relevant officer responsible for Equality on 01246 242407, e-mail enquiries@bolsover.gov.uk or 01246 217047, e-mail connectne@ne-derbyshire.gov.uk

Appendix C – Fax Cover Sheet

Instruction	
Fax contains sensitive or confidential information (please tick)	
The Department sending the fax confirms that the Fax No. has been checked and recipient notified confidential/sensitive information is to be sent (please tick to confirm)	

Council
letterhead

- Please complete the fax message in **BLACK** ink to ensure a successful transmission.
- If this is an **URGENT** fax please inform a member of staff.

FAX MESSAGE

Fax Recipient Information	Fax Sender Information
To:	From:
Fax No.	Tel No:
Attn of:	Date:
No. Of Pages To Follow:	

MESSAGE:

If any part of this fax transmission is not received please call 01246 xxxxxx

This transmission is intended for the named addressee(s) only and may contain sensitive

or confidential material and should be handled accordingly. Unless you are the named addressee (or authorised to receive it for the addressee) you may not copy or use it, or disclose it to anyone else. If you have received this transmission in error please notify the sender immediately.

Appendix D – Standard Layout for Letters

A letter sent out on behalf of the Council conveys a number of messages to the recipient in terms of paper quality, document layout and standard of printing. The actual message you seek to deliver in your letter is certainly hampered by a poor standard of presentation and enhanced by good presentation.

For this reason the following standards should be adopted when producing letters on behalf of the Council:

Font:

- Black Arial Point 12.

Margins:

- Left 2 cm
- Right 2 cm
- Top 2 cm
- Bottom 2 cm

Spacing:

- Single spacing in the main body of the document
- Discretion may be used when laying a document out when, for instance, only one or two lines continue on to the next page, you may consider reducing spacing or margins to achieve a pleasing presentation.

Page Numbering:

- Letters that continue over more than one page must be numbered (position – top of page and centre) from 2 to 'x'. ('x' being the final number of continuation pages)
- Letters that continue over more than one page should, where possible, use both sides of the paper.

Punctuation:

- Addresses on letters and envelopes should not use punctuation.

Address, Greetings and Signing off:

- Letters addressed to organisations and for 'Dear Sir/Madam.....' should be signed 'Yours faithfully'

- Letters addressed to named individuals should be signed 'Yours sincerely'.
- The sender's name and job title should be in lower case
- If the letter is marked 'Private', 'Confidential' or 'Personal' then this should also appear on the envelope, if a window envelope is not being used.

Enclosure:

- Where enclosure(s) are to be attached type 'Enc(s)' at the end of the letter at the bottom of the page
- Consider listing the enclosures if more than one.

Appendix D – Standard Layout for Letters continued

Your Ref:
Our Ref:
Please Ask For:
Direct Line: 01246 242
E-mail:
Date:

Council
letterhead

Council address as per
letterheaded paper

A N Other (Mr Other)
(Name of Organisation, if relevant)
Address 1
Address 2
Address 3
Address 4
Postcode

1 clear space

Dear Sir/Madam (Mr Other)

1 clear space

Re: Subject heading in bold

1 clear space

Main body of letter in blocked paragraphs and left aligned

EXAMPLE

.....

1 clear space

Yours faithfully (Yours sincerely)

5 clear spaces

Name of person sending letter
Title of person

Appendix E – Standard Layout for E-mails

To: E-mail Recipient
CC:
BCC:
Subject: Subject Heading

Dear/Hello (First Name/Surname as appropriate)

Good morning/ Good afternoon

Main body of message in blocked paragraphs and left aligned

An ending – e.g. Please contact me on (contact details) if you require any further information.

Regards

Name of person sending e-mail
Job Title
Department
Name of Council
Address of office base
Tel: 01246 xxxxxx
Fax: 01246 xxxxxx
Mobile: If applicable
e-mail: [generic or corporate e-mail@council.gov.uk](mailto:generic.or.corporate.e-mail@council.gov.uk)

Out of Office - Standard message for absences:

To: E-mail Recipient
CC:
BCC:
Subject: Subject Heading

Thank you for your e-mail. I am out of the office until xx/xx/xx and my e-mails will not be monitored during this period. I will respond to you on my return.

If your enquiry is of an urgent nature please call xxxxx xxxxxx or e-mail xxxx xxxx on xxxx.xxxx@nameofcouncil.gov.uk

Regards

Name of person sending e-mail

Job Title

Department

Name of Council

Address of office base

Tel: 01246 xxxxxx

Fax: 01246 xxxxxx

Mobile: If applicable

e-mail: [generic or corporate e-mail@council.gov.uk](mailto:generic_or_corporate_e-mail@council.gov.uk)