



**2025-
2028**

Colchester City Council: Customer Strategy

A three-year plan to deliver modern, inclusive and customer-focused services that meet community needs and prepare for Colchester's future.



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INTRODUCTION

Colchester is a city with a rich heritage and a vibrant, diverse community. As we prepare for the transition to a new multi-unitary authority future for Essex and the introduction of an overarching Mayoral Authority, our focus will remain on delivering excellent, accessible, and responsive services for all our residents, businesses and partners.

This Customer Strategy outlines our vision and priorities for the next three years, ensuring that our services are modern, inclusive and prepared for the future.

This document represents our commitment to meeting those expectations. It sets out a three-year plan to build on our strong foundations, design our services around customer need, and prepare for a seamless transition into a new unitary authority.

Where we redesign existing or design new services, we will be guided by the needs of our customers, seek to break down barriers between our services and make the best use of our existing technologies.



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FOREWORD

Councillor David King

Leader of the council

Welcome to our Customer Strategy for 2025-2028. This document marks a key moment for Colchester as we navigate a period of significant change, including the forthcoming Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and the establishment of a Mayoral Combined Authority.

Our challenge and our opportunity are to keep a strong focus on how we serve our residents, businesses and partners during this period of change. We must ensure that contact with our customers is straightforward, effective and leaves people feeling valued.

We have listened carefully to feedback from our customers and our dedicated staff. The message was clear: while you value the commitment of our teams, our systems and processes must be better.

Both our customers and our staff want services that are easy to access, consistent and that get it right the first time.

Our services should be more joined-up and make better use of technology, without leaving anyone behind.

This document represents our commitment to meeting those expectations. It sets out a pragmatic, three-year plan to build on the fundamentals, design our services around your needs, and prepare for a seamless transition into the new unitary authority.

This is a strategy for Colchester City Council and its arms-length companies, Colchester Borough Homes and Amphora (Colchester Commercial Holdings Ltd). The strategy will promote a unified approach to customer service across all our public bodies.

We are committed to involving our customers in the design of our services and breaking down internal barriers to effective service delivery. In conjunction with our Digital Strategy, we will continue to develop and optimise our technology to support our objective of delivering what our customers want and need.

PURPOSE OF THE STRATEGY



The purpose of this strategy is to build on a culture of continuous improvement and innovation, placing our customers at the centre of our services as we prepare for and transition into a new unitary authority in a multi-unitary future for Essex. It addresses the challenges and opportunities we face in enhancing our use of data, transforming services through technology and improving customer access.

Drawing on insights from our staff, residents and businesses, plus our public sector, health and voluntary sector partners and learning from leading councils, this strategy provides a sustainable deliverable roadmap for the continued modernisation of our services and operations. It addresses the need for a consistent approach to service delivery across the council and our arms-length companies, ensuring a "one council" experience for all our customers.

In the context of Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution, this strategy is designed to be a unifying framework, aligning our customer service ambitions with those of our future partners in the new unitary authority and devolved mayoral authority. It is our plan

for a smooth and customer-focused transition. The Council is committed to deepening its collaboration with health partners through our strategic alliance, building on our system-wide work to deliver more integrated and preventative services for residents. Central to this is the development of a 'Neighbourhood Health' model, which represents a fundamental shift in how we approach health and care. Through detailed diagnostic work involving over 150 staff from 18 partner organisations, a new, bespoke operating model has been created that moves beyond traditional service delivery to provide proactive, whole-person support.

This new approach focuses on addressing the root causes of poor health, such as social isolation, and empowers residents to co-manage their health and live well within their communities. Our participation as a 'Wave One' site in the National Neighbourhood Health Implementation Programme (NNHIP) will accelerate this transformation, helping us to shift care from hospitals into the community and build stronger, healthier and more resilient neighbourhoods for everyone.

Drawing on feedback from across our community, this strategy will:

Put customers at the heart of everything:

We will work with our customers to design future services that are simple, intuitive, and accessible to all, including those who are digitally excluded. This strategy ensures that while we pursue a digital-by-design approach, we will remain committed to providing high-quality, person-to-person support for those who need it most.

Work with communities, not just for them:

In line with our 'Communities Can' collaborative approach, we will embed Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) principles in everything we do. This means recognising and building on the strengths, skills, and resources within our communities when shaping policies, procedures, processes, and systems. By working together in this way, we aim to create better experiences for customers and stronger partnerships with community organisations.

Work with our system partners:

We will provide a more holistic approach to support, advice and signposting.

Continue to modernise our customer service offering:

Through the further development of our existing technology, we will continue to streamline processes, seek to reduce costs, and make it easier for our customers and partners to interact with us. This aligns with the wider Essex Digital Partnership vision of creating a connected, innovative and resilient digital ecosystem for the county.

Develop our existing data and technology to support customer service improvements:

We will make meaningful progress towards a 'One Council' approach where high-quality data informs our decisions, improves the design of our services, and, in return, drives efficiency. Our data will help us to better understand our customers, measure our performance and continue our work to continuously improve. Through our Digital Strategy, we will take advantage of emerging technologies to enhance our customer offering and improve our ability to provide a range of ways for our customers to interact with us. We will explore the ethical use of emerging technologies, including AI, to enhance customer interactions and streamline service delivery, guided by the principles set out in our Digital Strategy.

Build on our existing community initiatives and partnerships:

We will continue to work with trusted partners to maximise the support and assistance offered to our customers by working closely together, learning from each other and working as one to ensure assistance is not just a one-organisation approach. This will increase the knowledge of our teams to offer holistic advice and support.

Ultimately, this strategy will foster a culture of continuous improvement and innovation, ensuring that Colchester City Council is responsive, efficient, and ready for the future.

OUR VISION

By 2028, interactions customers have with Colchester City Council will be simpler, more seamless and more effective. We will strive to be a council that is easy to do business with, using existing and emerging technologies to enhance customer service efficiency and effectiveness, while ensuring accessible, person-to-person support is always available for those who need it most.

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

These six principles will guide our decisions, priorities and actions over the next three years.

- 1. Customer-centric and inclusive by default:** We will design our services from the outside in, starting with the needs of our residents, businesses and vulnerable groups. We will work with our partners to promote digital inclusion and support to address barriers to access (e.g. disability, geography and digital literacy). We will continue to engage with our resident's panel and community groups, both to collect feedback and when we design new services.
- 2. A 'one council' approach:** We will work to break down barriers between our services to provide a more joined-up experience. Customers will not need to understand our internal structures to get the service they need. This applies across the council, Colchester Borough Homes and Amphora.
- 3. Digital by design, human by choice:** We will create simple and reliable digital services that become the preferred way for most of our customers to access our services. In alignment with our Digital Strategy, we will embed inclusive design principles and work with partners to expand access to digital services. However, we will continue to provide accessible person-to-person support for complex issues and for those unable to use digital channels.
- 4. Customer service performance informed by data:** We will treat our customer data as a strategic asset, using it to understand demand, measure our customer service performance and make evidence-based decisions to improve service delivery and efficiency. We will set clear service standards and benchmark our customer service performance against our peers to demonstrate our impact and value to residents and stakeholders.
- 5. Staff empowerment and culture:** We will continue to develop our staff skills in customer service excellence and use of our technologies that support the customer experience. We will work with our partners to deliver training that provides value for money and excellent outcomes. We will continue to foster and promote a culture of continuous improvement and innovation, recognising and rewarding customer-focused behaviours.
- 6. Future-ready and pragmatic:** Every decision and change to our customer service and the delivery of our services will be made with the forthcoming Local Government Reorganisation in mind. We will prioritise service standardisation and alignment with our partners, including the county, health and our prospective unitary council cluster, to ensure a smooth transition for customers and staff to a multi-unitary council future for Essex and a seamless transition for our residents and businesses.

THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT

This strategy is shaped by four key drivers:

Evolving Customer Expectations:

Post-pandemic, expectations for digital services are higher than ever. Our customers expect the same ease and convenience from their council as they receive from online retailers. Our research shows that while digital is important to some of our citizens, the fundamentals of good service, such as accuracy, speed, and helpful staff, remain paramount.

Financial Pressures:

Like all local authorities, we face significant financial challenges. This strategy is not about spending more; it is about making the optimum use of the tools we already have. By enhancing digital self-service for common transactions, we can free up time for our expert staff to focus on complex cases where they add the most value, driving efficiency and achieving better outcomes.

National Best Practice:

We are aligning our approach with the Government Digital Service (GDS) blueprint, which champions joined-up, user-centred services. By adopting the GDS principles and making services accessible to all, we ensure our local strategy is consistent with the national direction for modern digital government.

New partnerships:

Our participation as a 'Wave One' site in the National Neighbourhood Health Implementation Programme will necessitate close working and sharing of customer information with our partners in health, coordinating our customer activities to provide more holistic services and building stronger, healthier, and more resilient neighbourhoods for everyone.



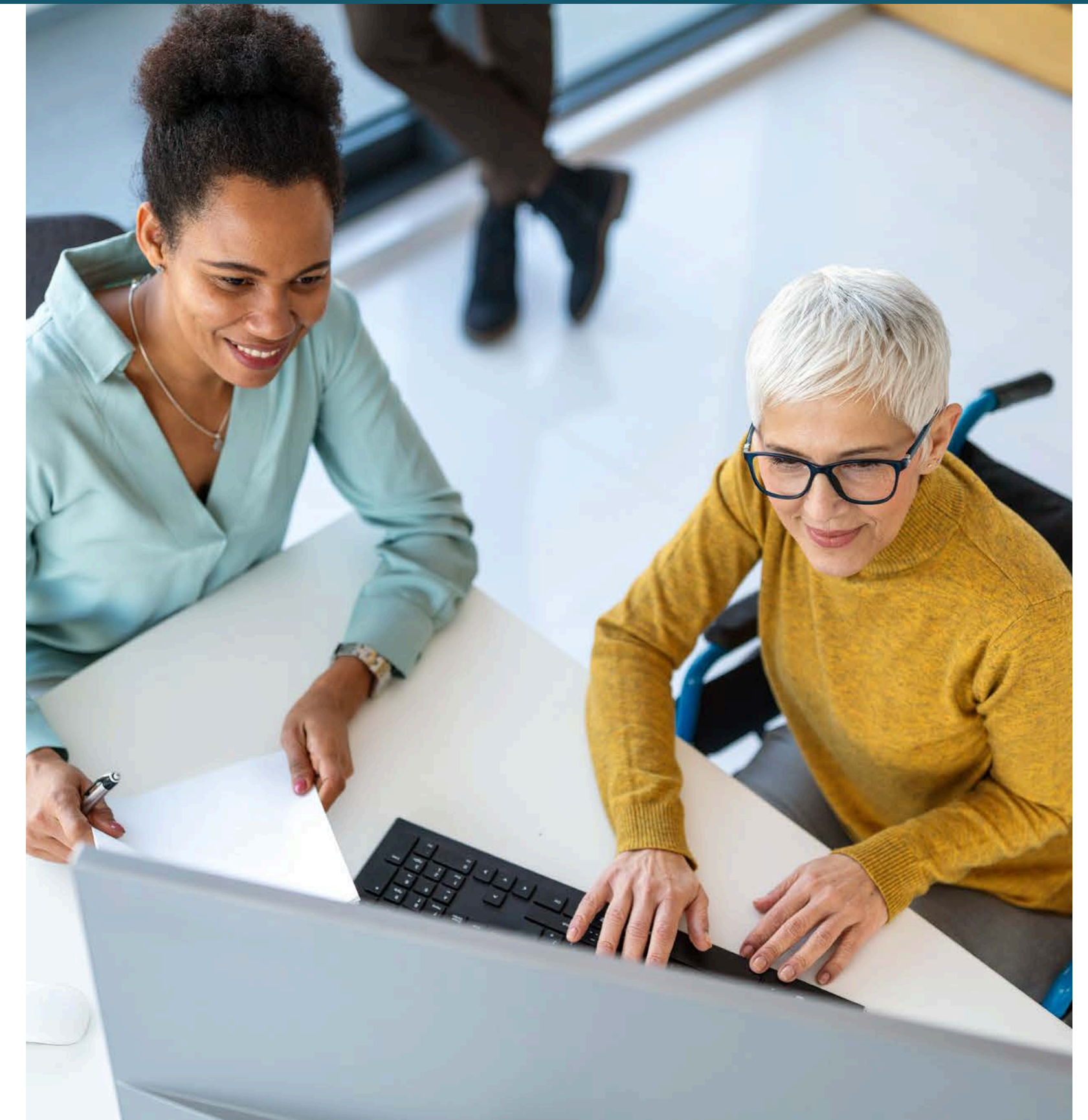
WHERE WE ARE NOW: WHAT YOU TOLD US

We began developing this strategy by listening to a wide range of stakeholders. The findings from our staff engagements and a public survey create a clear and consistent picture of the current interactions with our customers.

WHAT OUR CUSTOMERS TOLD US

We carried out a survey of members of our resident's panel, local businesses and key third sector organisations. The main themes heard were:

- **That person-to-person contact is highly valued:** The most important factor in customer experience is friendly, helpful staff who respond quickly. Many respondents, particularly our youngest and older residents, still prefer person-to-person contact for reassurance and for the resolution of complex issues.
- **Frustrations are with the basics:** The biggest frustrations we heard were difficulty finding information or using online services and customers having to repeat themselves to different staff at the council. This points to a need to continue to break down the barriers between our services and improve our website so that it better meets the needs of its users.
- **Digital services are not yet the preferred choice:** While email and phone are the most used channels, a majority still prefer the idea of talking to someone. Some groups of customers told us that they prefer to speak to someone often because our digital alternative is not simple, clear, or trustworthy.
- **Our website needs some fundamental improvements:** The most quoted improvement that would help people use online services was a simpler website, with clearer information. Outdated content and poor website navigation were mentioned as significant barriers to obtaining customer service online.





WHAT OUR STAFF AND LEADERS TOLD US

We held workshops with staff and spoke to senior leaders across the council. We also shared our findings with our councillors and sought their feedback. The main themes we heard were:

- **We have a service-centric, not a customer-centric culture:** There was unanimous agreement that the council should be more customer-focused, but our current ways of working often hamper our ability to provide the service we want to provide.
- **Technology is a barrier, not an enabler to good customer service:** Staff feel that the council's technologies could be more joined up and optimised for service delivery, particularly the website. The lack of a single view of the customer is the biggest obstacle to efficient and effective service.
- **A requirement for clear ownership and direction:** For this strategy to succeed, it needs to be "driven from the top" with clear ownership and a realistic, prioritised action plan.
- **Our resources are stretched:** Our staff are dedicated to the best possible customer service, but they are constrained by resources. The strategy must be pragmatic and get the basics right, with a clear commitment to investing in the skills and tools our workforce needs.

THE THEMES OF OUR STRATEGY





A CUSTOMER-LED COUNCIL

In an era of rapid change, understanding and responding to the needs of our residents is more important than ever. We are committed to delivering services that are consistent, accessible, and shaped by the people who use them. We will engage and listen to our customers and act on their feedback.

We will aim to ensure that interactions with the Council are both positive and meaningful. Our ambition is to create a culture where customer experience drives everything we do, ensuring no one is left behind.

We have begun a project to improve how our residents and businesses access our services by telephone and will be introducing a simpler system of navigating through our automated options, as well as providing clearer information on likely wait times and a call-back service for those who don't want to hold on the phone to speak to someone.

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WHAT WE ARE GOING TO DO

- Continue to develop a deeper understanding of our customers' needs, expectations and preferences, gaining insight through feedback and engagement.
- When we design or redesign services, they will be simple to use, inclusive and accessible to all, with a particular focus on our most vulnerable residents and those facing complex life events.
- Increase the communication with our customers for critical service delivery, to provide timelines and realistic expectations on the speed of service delivery.
- Establish clear and consistent customer service standards across the council and our partners in Colchester Borough Homes and Amphora.
- Review and improve our existing person-to-person contact via engagement with our partners and the voluntary sector, focusing on high-need, vulnerable and complex life events. Recognising the need to support our most vulnerable customers, particularly those facing housing challenges or complex queries, we will, within available resources and while managing demand appropriately, explore how best to provide in-person services where they are most needed.

HOW WE ARE GOING TO DO IT

- Create customer feedback mechanisms for quality and ease of use of our website and telephony services to gather insight, measure our performance and improve our service delivery.
- Use our residents' panel as a sounding board, and to provide ongoing input into the design or redesign of our services.
- Work with our partners in the voluntary sector and Health Alliance, to reach and support our most vulnerable residents and offer the most holistic approach to support we can.
- Use our existing technology solutions to provide more proactive communications for critical service requests.
- Complete the configuration of our new telephony management solution to better route calls and achieve a higher rate of first-contact resolution.
- Review the information and guidance that is available to frontline staff to minimise the need for customers to repeat information or navigate multiple departments.





A CUSTOMER-FOCUSED WORKFORCE

Our staff are at the heart of delivering excellent customer service. We will continue to provide high levels of customer satisfaction, make the best use of our existing technologies and equip our workforce with the right skills, tools and culture to innovate and adapt.

We will provide training and development, foster collaboration, and empower staff to resolve customer issues at the first point of contact. By building on customer service skills and digital confidence, our staff will be ready to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future.

We are already investing in staff development through targeted training programmes, and digital skills workshops. Our peer learning networks help share best practices and support continuous improvement. Staff are empowered to resolve issues at the first point of contact, supported by a growing knowledge base and recognition initiatives that celebrate customer-focused behaviours.

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A CUSTOMER-FOCUSED WORKFORCE

WHAT WE ARE GOING TO DO

- Equip our staff with the skills, knowledge and tools they need to deliver excellent customer service.
- Foster a culture of innovation and collaboration across the council, our arms-length companies and our future Local Government Reorganisation partners.
- Empower our staff to take ownership of customer issues and resolve them at the first point of contact.

HOW WE ARE GOING TO DO IT

- With our partner organisations, create training and development opportunities for staff, including customer service excellence, digital skills and existing technology solutions.
- Provide appropriate training for our staff when we introduce new technologies that affect the customer experience, so we continue to improve our efficiency and effectiveness.
- Continue developing a knowledge base of information and guidance articles for staff to improve their ability to deal with a wider range of enquiries and requests for service at the first point of contact.
- Increase the recognition and praise for staff who demonstrate a commitment to excellent customer service.
- Strengthen our centres of excellence and peer learning networks to share best practices and drive improvement.





A DIGITAL-FIRST APPROACH TO CUSTOMER SERVICE

Technology is transforming the way people live, work and interact with public services. The Council will embrace a digital-first mindset when designing or redesigning services, making it easier for residents to access information and services online. We will create user-friendly digital platforms, promote digital inclusion, and ensure that our digital services are secure, reliable and accessible to all.

At the same time, we recognise that not everyone can or wishes to use digital channels, so we will maintain visible person-to-person alternatives for those who need them. This theme is about delivering on our "digital by design, human by choice" principle, ensuring no one is left behind.

Our work will be guided by the objectives that are set out in the Digital Strategy.

We have already begun an ambitious project to design and launch a new council website that will be quicker and simpler to use. This strategy will guide the principles and customer-centred design approach that will align our new site with the needs of our residents, businesses and visitors.

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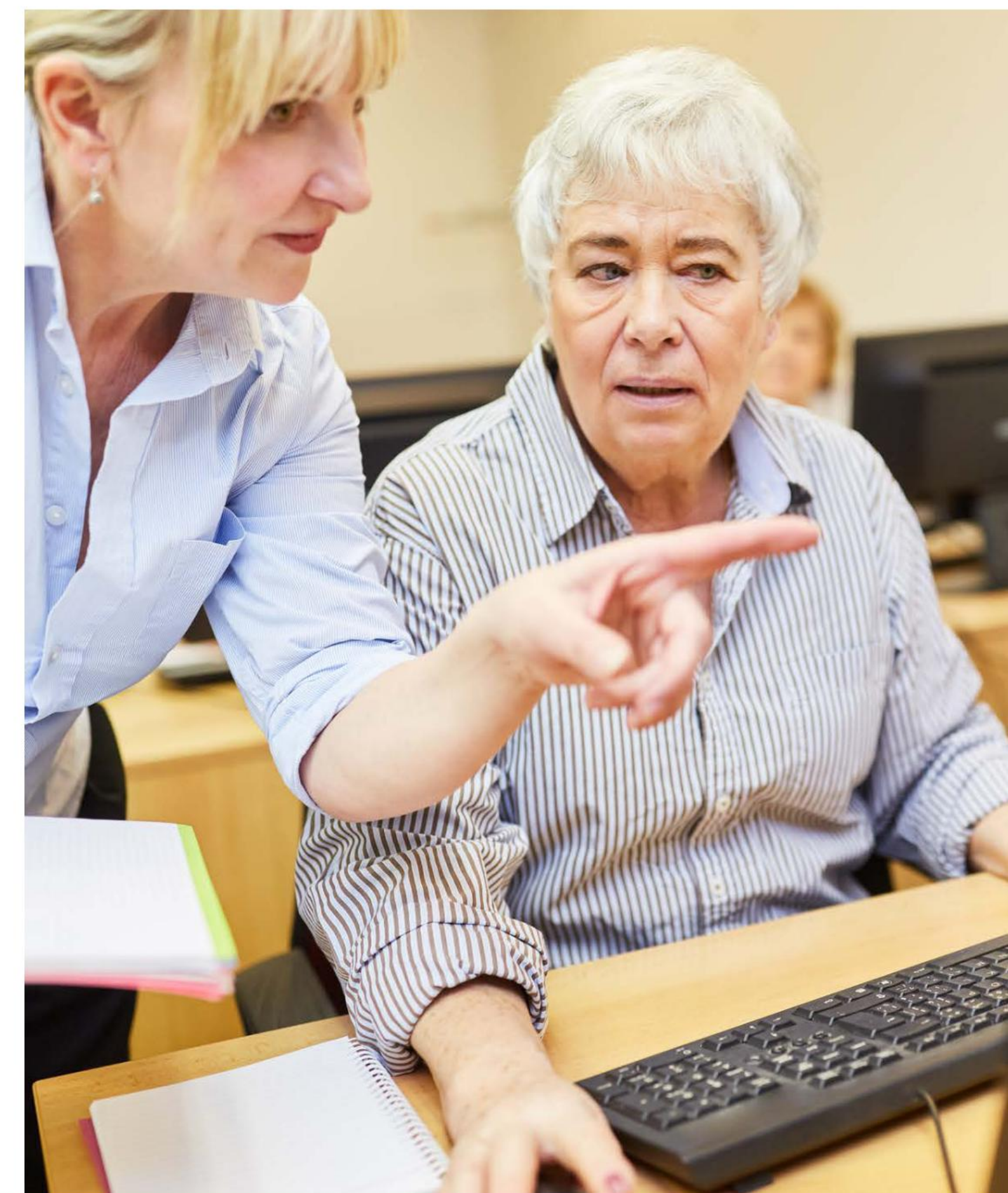
A DIGITAL-FIRST APPROACH TO CUSTOMER SERVICE

WHAT WE ARE GOING TO DO

- Increase the number of high-quality, user-friendly digital services that are accessible 24/7.
- Design or redesign services using the principles of the Government Digital Service blueprint.
- Make the best use of our existing technology to drive improvements to the customer experience.
- Promote digital inclusion and work with our partners to provide support and training for those who need help to get online.

HOW WE ARE GOING TO DO IT

- Complete the redesign of our website to be more user-friendly and task-focused, addressing usability and content barriers identified by customers.
- Continue to refine our online services and transactions to reduce the need for customers to contact us by phone or in person. We will increase the number of online forms as an alternative to email. This will allow our customers to contact us easily and provide us with the right information we need to deliver our services.
- Actively encourage residents to use our new and improved digital services for simple, repeatable tasks (e.g., reporting a missed bin, paying Council Tax), demonstrating that it is the quickest and most convenient option.
- Work with our public and voluntary sector partners and explore how to provide digital skills training and digital service assistance for those who need it.
- Work with our Essex partners to explore opportunities for shared digital platforms and services, supporting the “one digital ecosystem” vision.





AN EVIDENCE-LED APPROACH TO OUR CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Our customer data is a rich source of insight that can help us make better decisions, improve services and deliver value for money. We will harness the potential of our customer data to gain insights into our customers' needs, measure performance and drive continuous improvement.

By adopting strong data governance and sharing best practices with our partners, we will ensure that our use of data is ethical, transparent, secure and compliant with UK GDPR law. Our goal is to create a clearer view of the customer, enabling us to deliver more personalised and proactive services that meet the needs of our citizens and predict future demand with more confidence.

We are already using insights from our resident's panel and customer satisfaction surveys to codesign services and gather feedback. We also analyse compliments and complaints to identify what works well and where improvements are needed.

Our performance measures are not solely focused on speed. We also track quality such as how customers feel they were treated, whether their enquiry was resolved and whether they received the right information first time. These measures help us ensure that our services are not only efficient but effective and respectful.



WHAT WE ARE GOING TO DO

- Build on our use of customer data and insight to inform our decision-making and the design and redesign of our services.
- Work towards creating a more holistic view of our key customer data, to provide a more personalised and proactive service.
- Ensure that our use of data is ethical, transparent, and secure.

HOW WE ARE GOING TO DO IT

- Build our data analytics skills and capabilities to increase our understanding of our customers' behaviour and service demand.
- Build on existing data sharing protocols and agreements, such as the one with health and Colchester Borough Homes, and develop data-sharing agreements with our partners. This includes our future Local Government Reorganisation partners when confirmed, to create more joined-up future services.
- Develop data and performance information in an open and accessible format, as part of a set of corporate service standards.
- Work with Essex partners to develop a common approach to data management and governance, supporting the "tell us once, use everywhere" ambition.





A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Continuous improvement is key to our ambition of delivering excellence in customer service. We will create a culture where learning, innovation, and feedback that is embedded in everything we do. By regularly reviewing our performance, benchmarking it against others and acting on customer feedback, we will ensure our services evolve and improve to meet changing needs. Our commitment is to be open, accountable, and strive to do better for our residents and businesses.

We are already acting on insights from deep dives into specific services, aimed at reviewing the customer journey from start to finish. These reviews have led to targeted actions that improve how customers experience our services at every stage. We will embed feedback loops as outlined in the Digital Strategy, to test and scale improvements that enhance customer experience.

We collaborate across internal services to better understand how different processes impact the overall customer experience. This helps identify where handoffs, delays or inconsistencies occur and take coordinated action to improve the journey.

We also take part in the annual Customer Service Excellence (CSE) Assessment which is a nationally recognised quality standard that we consistently achieve. Targeting Customer Insight, Culture of the Organisation, Information and Access, Delivery and Timeliness and Quality of Service, it is designed to help embed a customer-focused culture and identify opportunities to improve.

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WHAT WE ARE GOING TO DO

- Build on our culture of continuous improvement, where we are always seeking to learn and improve.
- Regularly review and benchmark performance against other councils and learn from best practice.
- Listen to and act on the feedback from our customers to drive improvements to our services.

HOW WE ARE GOING TO DO IT

- Develop a council-wide performance framework for measuring customer satisfaction, with core principles for capturing aspects of their experience, such as how customers feel they have been treated, whether the council was able to deal fully with their enquiry and whether they were able to get the answers they needed from the first person that they spoke to. The framework will acknowledge the differing needs of our service users and the services we provide.
- Continue to work with our council partners in Essex to benchmark our services and customer satisfaction to both improve and align our service delivery with the councils that will form the new unitary council, Colchester City Council will become part of.
- Develop a “you said, we did” feedback loop to show customers how their feedback has led to improvements.





GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Delivery of this strategy will be overseen by the Council's Fit for the Future (our transformation programme) 'Future Customer' Project Board, providing strategic leadership, coordination and oversight for our customer transformation journey. This will be co-ordinated with the 'Digital Pipeline' Board, ensuring that digital initiatives are aligned with strategic goals, deliver value and support secure, accessible service delivery.

The Board will:

- Oversee key workstreams focused on improving customer experience, service design, digital maturity and data-led decision making.
- Align our customer and digital initiatives with corporate priorities in preparation for Local Government Reorganisation.
- Build engagement with Members, staff, stakeholders and LGR partners.

Who will be accountable for delivery:

Each one of the strategic themes will have a designated senior officer accountable for leading its development and implementation.

Periodic strategy reviews:

This strategy will be reviewed annually to ensure its continued relevance and responsiveness to changing needs and the LGR context.



PERFORMANCE MEASURES

To measure the success of this strategy, we have developed a programme of work directly linked to the Customer Strategy, delivered through the Fit for the Future 'Future Customer' strand. Progress will be monitored through Fit for the Future governance arrangements.

Alongside this, we will expand and refine our existing performance indicators to track progress against the strategy's aims. These indicators will focus on the outcomes that matter most to our customers and staff, including satisfaction, accessibility, responsiveness and continuous improvement. They will help us demonstrate progress, identify areas for improvement and ensure accountability across the organisation.



Colchester
City Council

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