

Tower Hamlets Customer Experience Strategy 2023-26



Foreword

We are pleased to introduce the Tower Hamlets Customer Experience Strategy 2023-2026 – the Council’s first ever customer experience strategy. Excellent customer service is important because it is the interface that connects us with our residents. The Customer Experience Strategy sets our commitment to improve and enhance the experiences our residents have when accessing our services.

Tower Hamlets is a special place. Our borough has the fastest population growth and the highest population density in the country. The borough has attracted people from all backgrounds. Yet, the level of poverty remains high both among children and older people. Our ambition is to help residents build better lives and maximise life opportunities in the borough wherever we can.

As stated in the Tower Hamlets Council Strategic Plan 2022-26, we are determined to be a council that listens to and works for everyone. While more people enjoy digital access in the borough, we are also aware some do not have access or are unable to use digital devices and channels. We will maintain face to face services via our Resident Hubs for those who need them, while providing a better-designed, streamlined digital offer for residents who want to access services online and via other channels such as social media, telephone, and our website.

Our residents are likely to seek our support, especially when they are facing difficulties in their lives. The ongoing cost-of-living crisis is an emergency. Many people are struggling to buy enough food and/or pay rent and heating. This has a huge impact on health and wellbeing. It is our aim to ensure we enable access to our services, and that residents receive necessary support as easily and quickly as possible.

This strategy sets out our vision to deliver against this commitment and will connect the council with our residents, facilitating their easy access to our services and helping them secure a better future. We will also work collaboratively with our partners, local communities, and individuals to help deliver and shape a positive customer experience.

Lutfur Rahman,
Mayor of Tower Hamlets

Cllr Kabir Ahmed,
Cabinet Member for Regeneration,
Inclusive Development
and Housebuilding
(Lead for Customer Experience)



Why do we need a strategy?



Tower Hamlets has an aspiration that all customers will benefit from accessible and high-quality services regardless of the channel they use.

We know that we need to change and improve our approach to customer service, whilst over the last four years we have improved the online offer, the way we currently provide customer services is still largely based around having contact by phone. We experience many follow-up calls/contacts, which is a drain on the council's limited resources.

We need to continue to invest in technology to streamline and simplify our services, enabling us to manage demand more effectively and release capacity for those with more complex needs.

We will embed a 'digital by design' culture across the Council in recognition that our customers want a more immediate, personalised service and expect to be able to contact us 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We want our customers to have access 24/7 to as many of our services as possible and give them the right information first time, quickly and easily.

For those customers with more intensive needs, we will provide a good-quality assessment and referral service either via the phone or face to face based on the customer's needs.

We need to drive new ways of working and transform how we deliver our services, focused on understanding the customers experience, expectations and needs.

We need to manage the growing demand for our services, supporting our customers to self-help wherever possible and embracing technological solutions where possible.

The financial environment around the council will continue to be challenging over the next few years. Recent high inflation has caused increases in fuel and energy costs which means council services cost more to deliver than they did before.

To support our customers and protect them from the negative impact of the cost-of-living crisis, the council continues to make significant investment in services. To provide financial support to those customers experiencing financial hardship, the Mayor approved an initial £2.7 million cost of living relief package a further £700,000 has been allocated to the tackling poverty programme and £1.2m to opening Resident Hubs across the borough.

At the same time, we will need to make significant savings over the medium term to ensure the council's budget is balanced and sustainable going forward, meaning it is important for us to provide solutions at the first point of contact avoiding repeat requests.

We are determined to ensure the services we provide deliver better outcomes for our residents, as such our commitment to bring the Leisure Centres in-house will provide us the with an opportunity to provide a more inclusive programme for our residents. We have set aside £35 million to deliver new leisure facilities on the St George's site, which will deliver better facilities for residents.

We understand that housing concerns is a major priority for our residents, the decision to bring Tower Hamlets Homes in-house supports our aspiration to provide a joined up service and best value to our residents.

Similarly our procurement practices, enables us to work with suppliers to deliver economic, social and environmental benefits for our community, through social value,whilst supporting the voluntary and community sector in the borough.

Our staff are critical in ensuring our customers receive the best possible experience and we will invest and train our staff to deliver our customer care standards and promise, maximising the value they provide at every interaction.

In delivering our Customer Experience Strategy, we will ensure our culture is customer centric and by working together, we can ensure that we make Tower Hamlets the best it can be.

Our TOWER values commit us to working together, listening to, and understanding what our customers need and respond appropriately to put in place affordable services equally and responsibly.

Our vision is that our customers will receive an excellent experience when contacting the council for a service, regardless of the channel they use.

This strategy is committed to deliver 3 key outcomes:



Outcome 1:

Council services are easily accessible, and inclusive.



Outcome 2:

Services are improved by using feedback, data, technology and innovation



Outcome 3:

The council embed a customer-focused culture to deliver an excellent customer experience.



Our Borough, Our Customers

Tower Hamlets has the fastest population growth and the highest population density across England and Wales. The borough is also one of the youngest, and most diverse populations in the UK, it is important to understand and predict how these changes will impact and subsequently inform the way we provide our services in the future.

Our borough's strength lies in its diversity and the different communities and cultures living side by side. We want Tower Hamlets to be safe, welcoming and a place of opportunity for all.

Our customers are varied and have a range of needs, everyone who lives, works, studies, visits, or does business in Tower Hamlets will use a council service in some form, whether they are visiting one of the council's parks, applying for a parking permit or simply walking down one of our streets. Some of these services, such as homelessness advice and support, are provided when people ask us for help. Others, such as child protection or enforcing planning rules, are part of our duties to look after people and the borough.

Within the context of this strategy, our "customers" are anyone who needs or chooses to interact with us. This includes residents, businesses, visitors, partners, community groups and staff.



310,300 Total population (2021)



156 languages are spoken in Tower Hamlets



Tower Hamlets has the fastest growing population nationally. The local population has grown by 22.1% from 254,100 in 2011. Nationally, population growth has been much slower over the decade since 2011 (6.6%).



Tower Hamlets is the most densely populated borough in England with 15,695 residents per square kilometre.



The working age population has increased by 25% since 2011. 220,300 residents are aged between 20 – 64 in 2021.



Tower Hamlets has seen the largest increase in total number of households of any local authority area across England and Wales. Between 2011 and 2021, an additional 19,200 households have been formed, representing a 19% increase since 2011.



Tower Hamlets has a young age profile. It is the only local authority area where less than 6% of residents (5.6%) are aged 65+



In 2021 there were 139,540 domestic properties (Valuation Office Agency, 2021)



There are 16,855 businesses in Tower Hamlets. The majority of these – 89% are 'micro' enterprises with less than 9 employees. (ONS IDBR, 2021)



The rising cost of living was the top issue for Londoners (77%) of the respondents, followed by housing affordability (58%) ISPOS Dec 22



Typical households' incomes are set to fall by 4% (of £1,100) in 2023/24 (Resolution Foundation Mar 23)

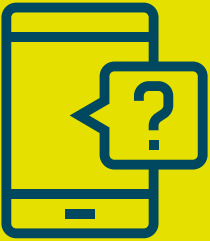
What do we know about our current customer experience?

The Institute of Customer Service envisages an organisation which provides excellent customer services as: "A world where customer experience makes a positive and sustained impact on individuals, organisations, society and the economic wellbeing of the UK."

Demand for council services is high and constantly changing and it is expected to continue to grow suggested by the trends in the demographic changes and the economy. Almost half of the borough population were born outside of the UK and many languages are spoken in the borough. A study by the Resolution Foundation shows that households finances will remain squeezed in 2023/24 and beyond.

We know that we provide a wide range of services to our customers, and we know that the experience will differ depending on the service accessed and the way in which it is accessed. We also know that as a public service provider it is important that customers can trust us to design services which respond to their needs and the needs of the local area and that these are delivered in a way which provides value for their money.





Increasingly more service users expect a better-designed, streamlined digital offer. In 2021, 92% of the borough households had the internet at home, which is in line with the national level. The use of digital technology has become important in the delivery of customer service. The council seeks to provide a high-quality customer experience in the digital age to help meet increasing demand for services.

At the same time, some residents do not use the Internet and choose face to face and/or telephone to contact the council. Research shows that a small proportion of adults (14% nationally) do not use the Internet. The strategy sets out the way we provide the service for all our customers, regardless of their needs and preferences to contact the council.



We receive over 340,000 phone calls every year. (ACD technology only) We currently have over 20 external telephone numbers, one corporate contact centre and six mini contact centres. 59% of those who responded to the 2021 Residents' Survey told us that it was difficult to get through on the phone.

Our website does not consistently allow people to interact for all our services simply and easily. This means that people must contact us via phone or have a face-to-face meeting, which costs us much more money to handle, and also leads to dissatisfaction when customers are waiting to speak to someone.



The most popular method of contact is currently by phone. In 2019, 75% of people surveyed contacted the council by phone. We also know that many of our residents have access to the Internet and can use online self-service.

The Annual Residents' Survey 2021 found that:

95% of residents have access to the internet.

92% of residents browse the internet for information about goods and services.

86% of residents use internet banking.

81% of residents shop online.

Face-to-face contact is the most expensive form of customer contact, costing approximately £16 for each contact. Contact by phone and online is cheaper. Contact by phone costs us approximately £6 for each call. The Government estimates that online contact is generally, 20 times cheaper than a telephone call and a staggering 50 times cheaper than face-to face contact.

Our customers also tell us that it is difficult to get through on the phone. The current contact methods are not sustainable as they are inefficient, expensive, and do not offer good customer service consistently.

Customer expectations that have grown since 2020

- Quality online experience couple with option to speak to a person.
- Responsiveness, speed, and simplicity
- Quality of products and services
- Organisations demonstrate environmental sustainability and enable sustainable choices.
- Ethical behaviour and governance
- Transparency
- A need for reassurance and trusted advice

Customers behaviours that have increased since 2020

- Recycling more
- Vigilance about value and costs
- Increased use of digital channels to interact with organisation but less social media usage.
- Determination to hold organisations to account.
- Increased levels of anxiety

- A growing divergence in financial, physical, and mental well-being
 - Increase risks of vulnerability and exclusion

Accessing council services



4,428,827
Website visits



164,436
Digital forms completed
(April- March 2023)

11,000
visits to Residents' Hub
(April 22 – March 23)



342,807
Telephone calls
(April 22 – March 23, ACD
technology only)



1,150,000
visits to Libraries and Idea
Stores (April 21- March 22)



73%
thought the council staff
were friendly and polite.

59%
found the council is
difficult to get through to
on the phone.



only
44%
of those that completed
the survey felt the council
responds quickly when
asked for help.



Over
900
digital forms available

Feedback from customers and staff indicated the following areas need to be focused on:

Need to put the customer at the centre of any service design/redesign and transformation.

Consistent delivery of services across 'all channels' of a high standard.

Focus on **'first point of contact resolution'** where possible.

Ensuring **joined up services** with easy access to information.

Partnership working

Focus on the customer experience and continuous improvement from **customer feedback**.

Review and update our **Customer Service Promise**

Reduce the time council services take to respond to phone calls and emails sent by service users.

Share customer experience performance with key external stakeholders.

Involve customers in the development of new services.

Our vision

“Public service is at the heart of what we do. The council will listen and work collaboratively internally, with other agencies and in partnership with our voluntary and community services to design and deliver fit for purpose excellent services.”

The council will ensure all customers who interact with us will have a positive experience irrespective of their channel of choice when they contact us. We will work across the council and with relevant partners to ensure that our customers consistently have a positive customer experience from collaborative and holistic service provision.

We will regularly review and update our customer service systems and technology to design services that add value to the customer experience and reduce costs / unnecessary steps for our customers. We will ensure:

- The approach is embedded in the council at all levels.
- Our staff are trained to achieve the vision and promote customer focus.
- The council design and review the customer experience, informed by user feedback, insight, and data.
- The council works with our partners to provide joined up services.
- The council provides channels to meet our residents' needs.
- Make use of digital technologies where suitable
- A flexible approach to designing services around customer demand.

We recognise that for the customer experience to be excellent, we need to become much more focused on the customer experience at each stage of the journey. To achieve this, we have developed a customer promise that will help us deliver our vision, improve the customer experience regardless of channel and achieves the outcomes we have set out in this strategy.

Our Customer Promise

This Customer Promise commits us to:

- Put customers at the heart of everything we do.
- Deliver services efficiently and effectively.
- Deliver a high standard of service.
- Regularly ask for feedback and use it to shape how we deliver services.
- Provide consistently good customer service across all channels.
- Be a customer-centric council

By always:

- Being helpful and polite.
- Providing honest and accurate information.
- Responding as quickly as possible.
- Giving our name
- Being clear and provide realistic time scales.

In return we ask that customers:

- Be respectful and treat our staff and other customers with courtesy.
- Let us know as soon as possible if your personal circumstances or requirements for a service change.
- Provide us the correct information we need to assist you.
- Engage with us in a way that supports our work and enhances the outcomes for everyone.
- Share your feedback and suggestions on how we can improve our services.

What do we want to achieve?

To deliver the strategy we will implement an action plan. Our outline action plan has been developed under three outcomes and objectives identified to deliver our vision:

Outcome 1:

Council services are easily accessible, and inclusive.



Our customers deserve excellent services, including customer service. Our services should be inclusive and accessible for all customers, who should be able to access the services easily.

We know that it is frustrating for our customers to contact us a few times to solve an issue, answer the same questions multiple times or wait for a response for a long time. We also acknowledge that our customers' choices for contacting us vary. Some people prefer 24/7 contact digitally others face to face. We aim to provide an excellent customer experience consistently regardless of the channel used to contact us.

We want to make it easier for people to contact us online. Helping our residents to become confident dealing with us online helps them to become more independent, this will also help them in other areas of their lives, such as getting information about jobs, or getting a better deal from their energy provider.

We aim to make the website as easy to understand as possible, only 18% of the website is in plain English, by making it easy and clear for customers to get access to services and information online, we will reduce the need to contact us via other channels.

We will continue to provide digital assistance for those who need support (for example, people with disabilities or those whose first language is not English).

The council and the borough's Voluntary and Community Services are working together to support our most vulnerable residents and offer face to face (by appointment), over the phone or virtual advice across a range of services via the resident hubs.

We will support more vulnerable residents through early action to make sure that services and resources are provided where they are most needed and prevent problems becoming bigger and more costly over time.

Our approach to customer service will take account of our residents' needs and people will be supported in different ways. For example, for those who lack confidence or need help going online, assisted self-service will be available across various channels. We also want to empower customers to self-serve.

Objective 1:

The council help our customers reach relevant services as quickly as possible, including by signposting them to correct and relevant services at the earliest possible opportunity.

Objective 2:

Our services are inclusive and accessible for all customers.

Objective 3:

Ensure more services are available digitally.

Objective 4:

Ensure all communication is relevant and timely.

What do we want to achieve?

Outcome 2:

Services are improved by using feedback, data, technology and innovation.

We believe the improvement of our service, in fact, all our decision-making, should be informed by evidence and data. The council will continuously improve customer experience using data and information.

Collected data and information on customer experience may include who our customers are, customers' satisfaction and needs, council staff's views towards our customer service and complaints on customer experience.

We will analyse customer activity, to understand what services they use, and identify root cause.

We will utilise data to identify early involvement, as this could prevent more problems arising in the future. By acting early, we can help our customers to avoid becoming homeless, or having children taken into care. It will also help to reduce pressures on high-cost services.

We know our service users prefer information being found and issues solved as quickly and smoothly as possible.

Technology and innovation are essential for any business that wants to succeed in today's environment. They can help to improve their efficiency, productivity, performance, problem-solving, adaptability and growth.

It is also important the technology we use is fit for purpose, reliable and easy to use for our customers and council staff. Furthermore, technology can enable us to collate data easily. Therefore, we aim to introduce relevant technology to serve our community.

We will use the [Government Digital Service design principles](#) in everything we do. We know we need to make things more efficient and simpler by removing unnecessary process steps.

59% customers said they felt it was difficult to get through on the phone and only 44% of customers felt the council responded quickly.

Objective 1:

Introduce an approach to collect customer feedback systematically.

Objective 2:

Routinely use data and information, including performance and complaints data, and best practice, to inform and improve services to make them relevant to customers.

Objective 3:

Ensure all customer service channels are effectively working.

Objective 4:

Use the best possible technology, that is easy for our customer to use.

Objective 5:

Implement new technology that will help better serve our customers and improve efficiency.

Objective 6:

Design our processes and systems with the customer in mind.

What do we want to achieve?

Outcome 3:

The council embed a customer-focused culture to deliver an excellent customer experience.



Embedding customer service culture in the council at all levels will help us achieve excellent customer experience. Such culture will build a foundation for innovation and improvement of customer service. To develop a customer service culture, we will involve staff in decision making in the design and improvement of services and encourage staff to improve their customer service skills.

The council will provide training opportunities for staff to improve their customer service skills, including digital skills and working with other services and partners.

It is critical for both the council as a service provider and service users to share what to expect from our services and what the council expect from service users.

Clear communication is key to achieve this. For example, the council will keep our customers up to date on progress, provide information through various channels, and communicate in different languages where needed.

Our new customer promise and customer care standards will clarify what our customer can expect from our service, we will also make it clear what we expect from our customers, we will develop a customer code of conduct.

We understand that, in times of trouble or distress, people may act out of character, and, in a very small number of cases, may behave in an unacceptable way, this makes it difficult for us to help customers effectively. We also have a duty to protect the welfare and safety of our staff and other customers. They should be able to come to work without fear of violence, abuse, harassment, or discrimination.

Our aim is to complete enquiries in one contact. If we are unable to, we will do our best to provide our customers with updates and realistic time frames.

Objective 1:

Introduce quality standards and professional accreditation.

Objective 2:

All staff have the knowledge and skills to deliver an excellent customer experience.

Objective 3:

Routine reporting on performance and customer satisfaction.

Objective 4:

Customer and staff are clear about expected behaviours.

Objective 5:

Transform our customer service model to reduce demand.

Objective 6:

Improve first contact resolution.

How we will make sure we achieve the strategy

Development and implementation of an action plan to deliver this strategy's outcomes will be regularly reported on and monitored by the Transformation Board, CMT and the Mayor's office

Delivery of our detailed action plan will help us deliver the outcomes of the Customer Experience Strategy. We have also developed operational measures of success to monitor the success of the work that will be undertaken as we move forward on the journey to deliver our customer experience strategy.

Measures of success

It is important we measure what is important to our customers and how we are performing against the plan, this will include:

- % of customer requests that are fulfilled within the agreed timescale
- % resolved at first point of contact
- % of customers reporting a positive experience at first contact
- % of customer reporting a positive experience after their enquiry/request/case was closed
- % Reduction of complaints
- % of customers who complete their transaction digitally
- % of avoidable / failure demand (demand resulting from a problem or mistake made by the council contact)
- % customers who say the website and online forms are easy to use
- Reduction in number of incidents raised regarding customer behaviour.
- Appropriate measures to monitor the implementation of the customer promise and customer standards.
- Customer satisfaction rating improvement.