

**To:** Cabinet  
**Date:** 12 July 2023  
**Report of:** Head of Business Improvement  
**Title of Report:** Citizen Experience Strategy 2023-25

<b>Summary and recommendations</b>	
<b>Purpose of report:</b>	To seek approval for a new Citizen Experience Strategy 2023-25
<b>Key decision:</b>	No
<b>Cabinet Member:</b>	Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council Companies
<b>Corporate Priority:</b>	All
<b>Policy Framework:</b>	Council Strategy 2020-24

<b>Recommendation:</b> That Cabinet resolves to:
1. <b>Approve</b> the Citizen Experience Strategy 2023-25 (at Appendix 1).

<b>Appendices</b>	
Appendix 1	Citizen Experience Strategy
Appendix 2	Consultation Findings
Appendix 3	Risk Register
Appendix 4	Equalities Impact Assessment

## Introduction and background

1. This Citizen Experience Strategy (“the Strategy”) outlines the approach the Council will be taking to provide a positive experience for all of Oxford’s citizens in accessing its services and engaging with it as a provider of them.
2. This Citizen Experience Strategy is more wide ranging than our previous customer contact strategy which were more transactional in nature and more focused on the first point of contact. This strategy will ensure that all of the City Council Services are in tune with the approach, and also embraces other organisations and

community groups so that together, we provide the right support for anyone living, working or visiting Oxford.

3. Since its last Customer Contact Strategy which covered the period 2019 to 2022, the impact of digital technology in day-to-day life has grown significantly, and driven further improvements in the way we deliver services. In addition, the Council's response to the Covid Pandemic has taught it much about the ways it can interact with its citizens, and that citizens rightly expect to be able to engage in a range of ways including using more digital channels.
4. The Council has taken this learning to review its approach and consulted with all of its stakeholders to present the Citizen Experience Strategy, which can be found at Appendix 1.

### **Current Context**

5. It is important to understand the key demographics of the citizens the Council is serving, to ensure that any strategy we develop is relevant in addressing the city's needs.
6. Oxford is a changing city that is becoming more diverse. According to the ONS Census 2021 data the population of Oxford is 162,040. The population is made up of 15.4% (24,991) Asian, 4.7% (7,535) Black, 5.6% (9,005) Multiple Ethnic groups, 70.7% (114,561) White and 3.7% (5,948) 'other' Ethnic groups.
7. The census also shows the profound health inequality that continues to exist in our city. Those aged 65+ years make up for 12% of the population in the city. 3.3% (5,415) of the population are living with either 'Bad or very bad health'. 14.5% (23,491) of the population identify as being disabled under the Equality Act.
8. Inequality also exists in significant parts of the city experiencing extreme poverty. The English Indices of Deprivation 2019 results show Oxford has one Lower Layer Super Output Area within the 10% most deprived areas nationally (Northfield Brook) and there are 9 areas in total among the 20% most deprived nationally, which are located in The Leys, Barton, Littlemore, Rose Hill and Carfax.
9. Digital disadvantage is also widespread. The Oxford Internet Institute recently conducted a survey of local residents to explore the impact of the digital divide in the city. The results revealed that almost a quarter of Oxford residents lack access to the internet, and this lack of access disproportionately affects those from lower-income households and minority ethnic backgrounds.
10. There are 4,580 registered businesses within the Oxford boundaries that provide approximately 113,900 jobs, each of whom will have a high expectation about how they engage with the city to be successful employers.
11. Visitors to the city also want a positive experience, and Oxford remains a key destination attracting approximately 7-million-day time and staying visitors per year.

### **Current Service**

12. The scale of our current front line business activity is significant. In 2022/23, the Council's customer contact centre handled just under 140,000 telephone calls (with over 96% of these calls resolved without recourse to the back office), the Customer

Service Officers handled over 4,000 face to face enquiries, and there were over 30,000 online form submissions on its website. For 2022/23 customer satisfaction with the Council's face to face service was over 97%, for its contact centre was over 80% and for the website was 41%.

13. The City Council has been accredited with the Customer Service Excellence quality mark since 2013. This standard recognises organisations that deliver efficient and effective services that place customers at the heart of service provision. The Council's most recent assessment was in March 2023, where it passed with flying colours with only one partial compliance across the 57 criteria. Additionally, this year the assessors awarded 11 Compliance Plus ratings where the Council were judged to have gone "above and beyond" what was expected.
14. The Council's face to face service relocated to the Westgate Library in January 2022, operating for 3 days each week alongside Citizens Advice Oxford. The benefits of this way of working are so much more than co-location. Working together has delivered speedier advice for citizens, joining up access to all Council services (particularly Council Tax, Benefits and Housing). The City Council has been able to signpost more directly to Citizens Advice for specialist debt advice.
15. The City Council's Covid response introduced locality hubs to ensure communities received the support and advice they needed during the pandemic. The City Council has built on that approach, creating locality networks in its communities, joining up service delivery across the Council and working with the County Council, other organisations and community groups to ensure it is supporting citizens to get access to the best support and advice.
16. The development of these locality networks will specifically help to tackle the health and poverty inequalities communities are experiencing. These networks will also help to bridge the digital divide which is a key enabler to improving quality of life.
17. Understanding the changing demographics as highlighted above, the organisation has access to a comprehensive range of language support services including telephone interpreting, face to face interpreting (Including British Sign Language Interpreters), video calls and document translation services. The current supplier for these is Word360, but we are currently re-tendering for this service, looking for a like-for-like offer which will be in place by the end of August.
18. Insight shows that Google Translate is widely used by non-English speaking citizens when accessing the internet and so site-specific translation services are not always required.

### **Consultation process**

19. The draft Citizen Experience Strategy was taken to the Leader's meeting on 25/01/23 and approved as a draft for consultation.
20. Citizens have been consulted in a number of ways. These opportunities were used to test objectives and language, and also to understand what barriers are faced in getting access to services. Officers visited existing Community Larders in Rose Hill and Barton and attended a Community Champions Forum at the Museum of Oxford and an online Diversity Forum. In addition, citizens using the contact centre and visiting the front-line service at the Westgate were surveyed on their views.

21. The Council commissioned a special session for advice providers to understand how the strategy and its objectives would affect their services.
22. A session was also held with the Director for Customer Experience and Cultural Services at Oxfordshire County Council, to ensure that the partnership approach suggested aligns with their direction of travel.
23. Individual discussions were held with every Service Head and representatives of their teams, to seek their feedback on the proposed strategy, its objectives and language. This feedback has been used to develop the Citizen Experience action plan and for services to consider their own more specific actions.
24. Staff were given the opportunity to share their views again on the objectives and language of the strategy, and also on what they would need to help them embrace and deliver against the proposed principles of the strategy. This was achieved using a series of online and in person sessions.
25. Different dimensions of the strategy were further tested with the Policy Officer Group and Equalities Steering Groups, in addition to their feedback on objectives and language. The Policy Officer Group were asked to consider alignment with other existing City Council policies, whilst the Equalities Steering Group has supported the development of the Equalities Impact Assessment.

### **Data and Insight Summary**

26. The insights gathered has been used to enrich the action plan, ensuring priorities already underway are still relevant. They have significantly shaped the language used. It has also been a valuable exercise to ensure that all Council services are fully aligned to the strategy principles. The full consultation findings can be found in Appendix 2.
27. There will be a greater emphasis on supporting those in digital poverty or with lower literacy skills. The action plan includes a review of the Community Involvement Policy, a commitment to explore how the new Resident's panel can be better used and how young people can be more formally engaged.
28. The Council also found a clear opportunity to work closely with its commissioned advice providers to ensure they are able to champion the benefits of digital access and are included in the locality network approach.
29. Improving the website was unsurprisingly a big priority in the feedback. There was a widespread demand for it to be more user-friendly, with better quality information that is updated regularly. A new approach to the content management of our website is being developed, and citizens will be engaged as part of this process.
30. The digital divide reported by the Oxford Internet Institute is concerning and persistent. Work has already begun with Activate Learning at the Blackbird Leys Technology Campus. We will be working together using their resources to provide digital skills and employability support for citizens. They will also be helping the City Council to be seen as a viable employer in the community and supporting citizens to apply for roles with us, in particular for the forthcoming apprenticeship scheme.
31. Better use of data and insight was another key theme. This is reflected in our priority to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the customer feedback and insight we

gather from a range of sources including member enquiries, comments and complaints and freedom of information requests. Internally, we also need to ensure that the organisation understands and uses that insight to support decision making and policy formulation.

32. Through the consultation process, services have also committed to undertake a range of actions to improve their offerings in line with the Strategy principles. These include policy reviews, improving web content, reviewing processes and service standards.
33. In terms of the language of the Citizen Experience Strategy itself, there was some debate regarding the use of “citizen” or “customer”. Comments included “customer” having a transactional or consumer meaning but may be a friendlier term. Some feedback said “citizen” may be a word that may exclude some of our communities; visitors for example may not feel they are citizens. There was no clear preference overall, or other more suitable suggestions but a strong feeling that whatever word is chosen, a definition is included in the strategy. A strap line to the Citizen Experience Strategy has been added to provide further clarity.
34. A definition has been included to say “citizens” are those who live, work in and visit the City Council.
35. A strap line to the strategy has been added to say “For everyone that lives in, works in or visits the City of Oxford”.
36. There was feedback over the vision which used the term “putting at the heart of everything we do”, which was said to be overused. In addition, the citizen feedback said that what was really important to them was knowing they had been listened to and understanding what the Council had done with any feedback given. The vision has therefore been amended to say “Put communities and citizens at the heart of how we work, ensuring they actively shape our services and that the right support is available for anyone living, working or visiting Oxford.”
37. Staff feedback also had clear themes. They were clear they need a better staff directory as well as development in customer service and equalities skills to support citizens and fulfil the ambitions of the Strategy. Staff also wanted to set clearer expectations for citizens of the service standards that the Council is working to. This feedback is reflected in the action plan to develop the citizen experience “culture” in the organisation.

### **Strategy Summary**

38. The shaping of and the emerging priorities of this new “Citizen Experience Strategy” differs from previous customer contact strategies. Wherever and however our citizens touch the Council’s business and services, it aims to ensure its promises and aspirations are always met. Work has been done to ensure alignment to the Thriving Communities, Equalities, Inclusive Economy and People Strategies.
39. The Citizen Experience Strategy sets a vision for modern, inclusive and accessible services. Embracing the benefits of digital technology and automation to make the experience quicker and easier whilst also meeting the needs of Oxford’s diverse communities, with access to the appropriate specialisms for more complex interactions.

40. The Council is equally committed to ensure that no-one gets left behind, utilising a range of access channels including face to face options to make that possible.
41. The Council will make the most of its data and insight, whether that is using customer feedback to improve processes, involving citizens in service design, or utilising data to spot trends and support business policy and decisions.
42. Strengthening support within communities and working collaboratively with partners, agencies and community groups will give holistic, right first-time solutions and advice. This is not just about solving short term day to day issues but ensuring early intervention, improving resident outcomes overall and reducing the call on council services, so it can focus on the most complex needs. The locality model is intrinsic to stimulating this approach.
43. The Citizen Experience Strategy has 4 pillars that accord with the Customer Service Excellence Standard. They are:
  - Citizen focused
  - Positive Citizen Experience
  - Inclusive Access
  - Get it right first time

### **Delivery**

44. The action plan for delivery of the Strategy, showing how each of the 4 pillars are addressed can be found within the Strategy.
45. Delivery of the Citizen Experience Strategy action plan is overseen by the Fit for the Future Board. An Annual update on progress will be drawn up for the Cabinet Portfolio Holder to share more widely.
46. We will be improving digital access to services for citizens and improving back-office automation that will mean less manual intervention by staff. We will be measuring how successfully citizens use these new digital processes. We will also continue to measure satisfaction with our web, contact centre and face to face services. These will be stretching targets that sit alongside clear plans for improvement.

### **Financial implications**

47. Implementing this strategy will contribute to savings already included in the medium term financial plan (MTFP) and currently requires no additional funding beyond that already identified in the MTFP, such as for the website redevelopment. Should any additional requirements or savings surface over time, they will be included in the budget process in the usual manner.

### **Legal issues**

48. There are no legal implications arising directly from this report. In delivering services the Council must be mindful of the public sector equality duty to consider how its policies or decisions affect people who are protected under the Equality Act 2010. The duty requires organisations to consider how they could positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations. It requires equality considerations to be reflected into the design of policies and the delivery of services, including internal policies, and for these issues to be kept under review.

**Level of risk**

49. This can be found at Appendix 3.

**Equalities impact**

50. This can be found at Appendix 4.

**Carbon and Environmental Considerations**

51. One of the central themes of the Citizen Experience Strategy encourages citizens that can to access services to use digital channels. It also promotes early intervention by using our locality networks. This all helps to minimise travel which reduces the impact on the environment.

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**Background Papers:** None

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