

Mansfield District Council

Customer Service

Code of Practice and Standards

April, 2007

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1. Introduction

We are committed to providing a high standard of customer service to all customers of Mansfield District Council. Our customers expect an efficient, accurate and cost effective service, the sort of service we would expect to receive as customers ourselves.

Improving customer service is an important goal for Mansfield District Council. By setting and monitoring service standards, we will be able to measure by how much we have improved.

This Code of Practice and Standards applies to **all** employees of Mansfield District Council for use as a practical guide to providing good customer service. The Standards were developed to give consistency to customers contacting the Council and will be applied consistently to both internal and external customers alike.

Members and local Members of Parliament are also customers and the standards laid down are equally applicable however it is also important that Members and MP's are kept informed of actions taken and progress in relation to any enquiries they may make.

We appreciate that local circumstances and resources may occasionally make it difficult to meet these standards. However, we should all be aiming to achieve these standards and setting realistic targets for how often they can be met.

Message from Ruth Marlow Managing Director:

“High standards of customer service are at the heart of excellent public services. Research has shown that the biggest influence on people’s perception of the Council is the quality of the contact they have with Council employees. It is, therefore, essential that we all ensure that we meet or exceed the standards laid down in this booklet. High standards of customer services will ensure we have happy customers which, in turn, will not only be of benefit to the customers themselves, but will have a positive impact on the quality of our working environment and the esteem in which the Council is held by the people who use Mansfield District Council services”.

Equal Access

This document can be made available in other formats.

Please contact Customer Service and Partnerships on (01623) 463463 if you need interpretation or help reading it.

2. Who Are Our Customers?

The answer is simple. Everyone!

Most people think of a customer as a member of the public. However, our customers are all the people and organisations we provide a service to and with whom we deal with at work. This includes citizens of the Mansfield district, visitors to the district, businesses and partnership organisations. It is also important to note that internal colleagues and local councillors and MP's serving these groups are also customers. All of these customers are entitled to the same high level of customer service and care.

3. What is Customer Service?

What was seen as good practice 5 or 10 years ago is no longer sufficient. Customers' expectations have changed and customer focussed organisations can never stand still.

Good customer service consists of many things. In essence it is about ensuring that we give our customers the sort of personal service and response that we ourselves would want, if we were in their place. Our customers have a right to expect the best possible standards of personal service. They should be treated with equal respect, listened to and responded to in a polite, helpful and timely manner. As a minimum, our customers should expect:

Fairness

Reliability

Accuracy

Honesty

High quality

Consistency

Reliability

Attentiveness

A professional attitude and appearance

Staff who go that "extra mile" (are proactive)

Clean, accessible public offices

To be treated as an individual with recognition of their individual needs.

4. Why Do We Need a Code of Practice and Standards?

There is already a lot of good customer service practice within the Council, and a number of services already hold the prestigious Charter Mark. However, we need to extend this good practice to ensure that the same principles are embraced and adopted by all employees of the Council.

This will enable us as an authority to respond to, and communicate with, our customers in a consistent manner, no matter who they contact or the method they choose to do so.

Also, the Government is committed to improving and modernising public services and is keen for us to provide high standards of customer service to local citizens. Through Best Value and the recently introduced e-service delivery standards for many service areas, the Authority has embarked on a programme of continuous improvement so that our customers can expect us to get better at delivering the services they pay for.

There are national and local performance indicators which measure how we perform. We need therefore to be confident that we consistently deliver high standards of customer service.

These standards set out the way in which we should deal with our customers whether by letter, telephone, face to face, e-mail or another form of communication.

Occasionally, there will be difficulties with some customers. However, following these standards should reduce the number and impact of these incidents.

5. Standards, Targets and Performance Measures, What Are They?

A **Standard** is the assurance we give to customers about the service they can expect from us and should form part of the business planning process. Standards set should be:

- **Specific** • **Measurable** • **Achievable** • **Realistic** • **Timely**

e.g. "We promise to answer all telephones within 5 rings"

A **Target** is the commitment we make to achieve a stated level of service.

e.g. "We will achieve this 85% of the time"

A **Performance Measure** is the method by which information is collected that demonstrates how well we are doing and whether the target is being met.

e.g. "During May 06 we answered 86% of telephone call within 5 rings"

6. Customer Service Code of Practice

(a) The Promise We Make To You

However you choose to communicate with us we will:

- Be welcoming, fair, responsive and courteous in the delivery of quality services.
- Be professional and have well informed staff who take pride in what they do.
- Aim to get things right first time.
- Let you know what we can provide and what you should expect to receive.
- Respond effectively to customers' complaints and use feedback to improve continually.
- Enable customers to tell us when we get it wrong.
- Communicate clearly and without jargon.

In return we ask that our customers are courteous and respectful towards us and provide the information we need to deliver our services.

All employees of the Council have to work in accordance with legislation and guidelines. This includes the Data Protection Act, confidentiality guidelines, the Equal Opportunities Policy and our own Equality & Diversity Policy.

We can only use the personal information we hold for the purposes for which it was obtained. It must not be disclosed to anyone except those noted in the registration and those allowed by law to receive it.

In our Equalities Policy statement we promise to carry out research and consultation to understand your needs and the impact of any service changes. As an employer, we will also consult and involve our workforce.

We will use this information so that we do not unfairly discriminate on any grounds. We are committed to reviewing, and where necessary, changing how we do things to address disadvantage and to improve equality performance levels within the Council.

(b) Members and Members of Parliament

When dealing with enquiries from Members or Members of Parliament it is expected that the Customer Service Standards laid down in this Code of Practice are equally applied, however it is vital that Members are regularly kept informed of progress in relation to their queries. Queries may emanate from e-mails, letters, faxes, telephone enquiries, or from Meet your Local Councillor events, where enquiries are in relation to specific Portfolio Holders area of responsibility the Portfolio Holder must also be kept informed of any queries and action taken in responding to those queries.

7. Customer Service Standards for Telephone Communication

The telephone is a powerful communication tool and is by far the most popular means for customers to contact us. It is vital, therefore, that we make the best use of it.

(a) When answering incoming calls staff should:

- Aim to answer before the 5th ring.
- Greet the caller in accordance with the Customer Service Code of Practice, in a welcoming and courteous manner.
- Use 'good morning/afternoon', identify their department and **always** give their name. e.g. Good Morning, Contact Centre, Andrew speaking, how can I help you?
- Be friendly.
- Speak clearly and politely.
- Don't use jargon.
- Listen to what is being said and summarise the conversation.
- Be helpful.
- Log the call if appropriate.
- Offer to call the customer back if the enquiry will take a long time.
- Ensure the customer understands what they are being advised.
- These guidelines will also be followed when receiving internal calls, colleagues are your customers too.
- If a colleague's telephone is ringing and they are not available, answer it and take a message, never leave a telephone unanswered.
- If the caller asks for your full name, give it.

(b) If you have to transfer a call you cannot deal with you should *always*:

- Tell callers what you are doing and give them the extension number and name of the person you are transferring them to.
- Pass on as much information as possible to your colleague. It's not good enough to say 'I've got a call for you'. It's not fair to them and it annoys the customer if they have to repeat everything again.
- If no one is available to take the transferred call, you should take a message and advise the customer that someone will call them back.

- 'Own' the call until you are satisfied that the customer has been transferred to the correct person or that their query has been resolved satisfactorily.

(c) Voicemail/Messages

When someone makes a call, it is frustrating when a telephone is not answered or is answered by someone who cannot deal with the query and asks you to ring back.

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

- Let team members know where you will be, if/how you can be contacted, and when you are likely to be back.
- Make arrangements to redirect calls where possible, either to you or to someone who can take a message.
- Ensure calls are returned within 1 working day where practically possible.
- Use voice mail if available.

If you take a message for someone else:

Make sure it is clear and concise. Take a note of the caller's name, location, designation, telephone number, date, time and when the caller is available to receive the return call

(d) Answering Machines

Answering machines should only be used when no one else is available to take a message and to give the caller an opportunity to make some contact with you.

Answering machines should:

- Only be used for overflow calls, if the number dialled is engaged, when there is no other way of receiving messages or when the work area is closed.
- Be set up to receive messages. Where this is not possible, a clear message should be left informing the caller of when they could call again.
- Be switched off when you are back in the work area.
- Contain a welcoming greeting and a clear message about whose answer phone the caller has reached and, where possible, when you will be returning, if this is likely to be more than 1 day.

- Contain a message where appropriate informing the caller of an emergency number.
- Be checked upon return to the office and messages acknowledged within 1 working day or when practically possible

(e) Voice Mail

If you have access to voice mail, it can be used when you are away from the work area to pick up messages from a different location:

Voice Mail should:

- Contain a welcoming greeting and a clear message about whose voice mail has been reached and, where possible, when you will be returning.
- Contain a message, where possible, informing the caller when to expect a call back or, where appropriate, an alternative number or emergency number, as appropriate.
- Be checked as often as possible.
- Be responded to within 1 working day where practically possible. If you are likely to be absent for longer, make sure that someone else checks your voice mail and responds to the calls.

(f) Minicom (Text Phone)

The minicom (text phone) service is a telephone typewriter device. This allows communication between deaf, hard of hearing, speech-impaired and/or hearing persons by use of specially adapted telephones, which send text through the telephone lines. The council's minicom is operated by Central Control on 01623 463444.

(g) Typetalk

RNID Typetalk is the UK's national telephone relay service, which enables deaf, hard of hearing, deafened and speech-impaired people to communicate with hearing people, using the telephone network. It is run by the RNID and funded by BT, and relays conversations between UK textphone (textphone) users and voice telephone users all over the world. It is operated 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, all year round. It enables a hearing person to make a call to a deaf person without the need for a textphone, and likewise, a hearing person does not need to have textphone in order to receive a call from a deaf person.

8. Customer Service Standards for Written Communication

These standards are set for how quickly we should respond to written communication. They are a guide and where a response can be made sooner, all efforts should be made to do so.

Letters should be dated when received and passed to the addressee or appropriate person within 1 working day where practicably possible.

(a) When responding to any written communication you should:

- Acknowledge letters and faxes within 5 working days.
- Respond fully to any correspondence within 10 working days or advise if this is likely to take longer
- Reply using Council headed paper
- Include a telephone number and email address
- Reply in plain jargon-free language
- Be accurate, especially when using or referring to names
- 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, job title and service area of the person responding.
- Check for grammar and spelling before sending.

(b) Absence

If you are to be away from work for any length of time, make provision for someone to deal with your correspondence in your absence. An acknowledgement should be sent within 5 working days. If no one else is in a position to deal with the enquiry, a reply should be made to the customer, confirming when the enquiry will be dealt with.

(c) Redirecting Mail

Occasionally, it will be necessary to redirect correspondence as customers may be unsure where to send mail. It is poor customer service to move documents around the Authority without dealing with them effectively.

If correspondence needs to be redirected:

- Check to see if the correspondence has already been forwarded to you from elsewhere and try to find the right addressee.
- Aim to redirect within 1 working day where possible
- Check that the person you are forwarding it to is the correct recipient
- Include an explanation saying from where and to whom it has been sent
- If necessary, contact the customer to explain what has happened and advise who the person dealing with their enquiry will be.

9. Electronic Communication

(a) E-mail

E-mail is fast becoming a more common form of communication; however, it is often seen as informal. You should treat all e-mailed correspondence with the same attention to customer service as any other form of communication.

The e-government agenda requires us to respond quickly and effectively to enquiries sent electronically. With this in mind emails and electronic submissions should be acknowledged within five working days.

E-mails should be formatted in the following way:

- Always enter an appropriate subject title.
- Begin the message with the name of the person you intend to send it to.
- The message should follow the Council's e-mail protocol guidelines over content.
- Unless absolutely necessary, do not include graphics in e-mails.
- Ensure that e-mail attachment sizes are kept to a minimum.
- An email signature must be set up by all users in the following format:

Name
 Job title
 Mansfield District Council
 Phone: 01623 46XXXX
 ▪ E-mail: xxxxxx@mansfield.gov.uk

- Electronic signatures must not be used in emails as these can be used by others for fraudulent purposes.
- Strap lines must not be used unless approved by the Head of PPR as they would cause a large increase in storage requirements for e-mails.
- Backgrounds must not be used as they would cause a large increase in storage requirements for e-mails.

- All email fonts must be set to Ariel 12 and all written text should be in black to comply with guidance from the Royal national Institute for the Blind (RNIB).

All group e-mails and forms submitted over the web are directed through the Contact Centre and if a response is required or a service requested are added to the Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) and a unique reference number allocated. An e-mail is then be forwarded to the customer giving them the unique number to enable them to refer to it for progress.

The email or form is then be forwarded to the appropriate group/department with the unique number allocated for action and/or reply. If no action is required then the email or form will simply be forwarded to the appropriate department/group and not added to the CRM.

A full response to an email should be made within 10 working days, or advice given to the customer if this is likely to take longer. The CRM should then be updated to reflect that the request has been completed.

(b) Absence

If you are going to be unavailable to acknowledge or answer email correspondence within the specified timescales you should use the 'out of office assistant' on Outlook to advise that you will be unavailable to respond and offer alternate contact details to the customer.

Out of office message should contain the following details:

- The date of your return to work
- Details of who can be contacted in emergencies with name, job title, phone number and e-mail address.

(c) E mail Security

There has been a great deal of concern nationally and locally about the misuse of e-mails. This has prompted Mansfield District Council to produce an e-mail Protocol Statement (March 2007), which is available to all staff on the Council's intranet.

It is vital that anyone using email read these guidelines in full and always adhere to them. The protocol highlights the rights, responsibilities and limitations on the use of e-mail.

The objectives of the Protocol are:

- To educate e-mail users about the legal risks they may inadvertently take.
- To make clear to users who they should contact about any particular aspect of the protocol.
- To notify users of any privacy expectations in their communication.

This protocol applies to *everyone* who has access to the authority's e-mail system, including all employees, Council members and outside contractors.

10. Face To Face Customer Service Standards

There are a variety of ways in which staff will meet face to face with customers. This could be at any of the Council public service points, satellite sites or out in the district, in customers' homes or in the street. Wherever we meet with customers, they should be treated in accordance with the standards set out in the Customer Service Code of Practice.

(a) When dealing with customers at the first point of contact you should:

Always wear your identity badge.

Aim to greet or at least acknowledge, customers as soon as they enter the building or approach an enquiry desk

Speak clearly and face the customer. If the customer needs an interpreter, guidance should be sought

Make customers feel welcome and find out how they can be helped

Try not to keep customers waiting for more than 10 minutes once they have made initial contact at a reception point. If this is not possible, they should be given the option of waiting until they can be seen (and told how long this will be) or making a specific appointment.

If the customer has an appointment you should ensure where possible to be on time, if you are likely to be delayed let someone know so that the customer can be advised on arrival

If, for any reason, you are unable to keep an appointment, arrange for the customer to be seen by someone else. Or make another appointment, giving as much notice as possible.

If the customer has an appointment with someone else, let the member of staff know that they have arrived.

If you are visiting the person's home or place of work, you should:
Always give your name and show your identity badge

Explain the reason for the visit

If you know you will be late for an appointment, whenever possible call and let the customer know.

11. Equality and Diversity

Anyone who has contact with customers must be aware of Equality and Diversity issues. We must ensure rights of equal treatment and accessibility and accommodate diversity for the groups covered by legislation (race, age, gender, disability, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religious belief and members of the Traveller community).

All staff should be aware that discrimination against the groups covered by Equality and Diversity legislation is illegal. Mansfield District Council has a mandatory legal duty to promote equality and eliminate discrimination and all staff must play their part.

The need to manage diversity and ensure equality of access also relates to physical access. For example low counters and ramps.

Translators for those whose first language is not English can be accessed through EITI. This service is available by calling 0870 701 2020.

Your service area will need to be registered with EITI and have a password to access this service. Your line manager will have the details of this.

EITI can also be used for translation of written documents.

(a) Interacting with Disabled Customers

Disabled customers should be treated as any other individual, but you should recognise any special needs that the disabled customer may have. Do not be afraid to make physical contact as you would for anyone else, for example offering a handshake.

When offering assistance always wait until the offer is accepted - it may not be welcome. Then ask the person you are helping to tell you the best way to assist them.

Do not talk to a disabled person through another person unless you are asked to do so, or it is the only way of communicating.

Be prepared to sit down or crouch to speak with a person in a wheelchair. Do not stand upright and tower over them as this can be intimidating. Even where it is the companion you need to speak to position yourself to make sure the wheelchair user is included and can join in.

Do not lean or rest on the wheelchair. Remember, to the wheelchair user the wheelchair is part of their body space.

(b) Interacting with customers with Sensory Disabilities

Remember, the customer may want privacy to communicate his/her needs so offer a private interview. It is not good practice to try to communicate with customers by talking loudly or shouting at them through a counter window.

We have a minicom (text phone) facility at the Civic Centre for the hearing impaired. The number is 01623 463444.

We can obtain signers but this can take several weeks. Ask if the customer can lip read. If so speak plainly and ensure the customer can see your face clearly. If the matter is urgent and the customer cannot lip read conduct the interview in writing with the customer's agreement.

Write clearly, preferably in block capitals. Although this process may take time the main thing is that the customer is happy and can access the service.

Make sure, where appropriate, that customers are aware that we can provide our leaflets in large print for visually impaired customers.

12. Customer Feedback

(a) Complaints and Comments

Complaints and comments are an essential way of gaining feedback from our customers. They allow us to review and evaluate our services and should be acted upon.

The Council has a procedure for gathering complaints. The Complaints booklet with complaints form should be available in your place of work. Anybody can telephone, write, e-mail, send in the leaflet or come in person to make a complaint about Mansfield District Council.

Complaints should be logged onto the CRM system, acknowledged within 5 working days and a full written response within a further 15 working days.

(b) Consultation

The Council is committed to listening to what local people have to say about what should happen in the district. In order to check how good our customer service is from the user's point of view, it is possible to gain feedback using consultation.

A consultation strategy and guidelines document has been written for the Council which can be found on the intranet in the Corporate area.

13. Our Customer Service Aims

These are the minimum standards of service all customers (including Members and Local Members of Parliament) can expect when accessing our services. All employees of the Council should be familiar with them and be aware of how they contribute to achieving them.

We will:

- Be welcoming, fair, responsive and courteous in the delivery of quality services.
- Be professional and well informed and take pride in what we do.
- Aim to get things right first time, every time.
- Let you know what we can provide and what you should expect to receive.
- Respond effectively to customers' complaints and use feedback to continually improve.
- Keep Members and Local Members of Parliament informed of actions taken and progress in relation to their enquiries.
- Enable customers to tell us when we get it wrong.
- Aim to answer your telephone call within 5 rings.
- Acknowledge emails and electronic submissions within 5 working days.
- Acknowledge letters and faxes within 5 working days.
- Respond fully to any correspondence within 10 working days or advise you if this is likely to take longer.
- If you visit us, make an officer available during office hours to discuss or note your enquiry.
- When you visit, we will try to serve you within 10 minutes.
- Identify ourselves when we visit you, using a photographic identification card, which will include a name and department.