Contents

Foreword
What is “Access to Services”?
The challenges to overcome
Responding to the challenge
Work in progress
Contents

Foreword .......................................................... Page 4
What is “Access to Services”? .............................. Page 5
The challenges to overcome ................................ Page 6
Responding to the challenge ................................ Page 7
Work in progress .................................................. Page 9

The Council’s first Customer Access Strategy was produced in March 2006 and set out SLDC’s aims to improve (and make easier) access to its services for the local community, as well as visitors to the area.

The strategy recognised that the Council must first consult with the public and its officers and agree priorities before setting to work on improving access to services to meet local requirements. South Lakeland is changing and the Council must also develop to serve the varying needs of its population effectively. For example the area has attracted large numbers of eastern European migrant workers over the last couple of years, working in factories, service stations, hotels and restaurants. These workers have different communication and access needs and SLDC must adapt and respond to these changing demographics.

A number of projects are already in development across the Council and this strategy describes the work they are doing and how the Council aims to improve by 2011.

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The Council, in August 2007, conducted a wide ranging customer access survey across South Lakeland, using a range of methods (telephone questionnaires, focus groups, online surveys and mystery shopper surveys) on the quality of service the Council offered.

The results of this survey, along with recommendations from the Audit Commission, our first Access Strategy as well as Council officers input has come together to provide SLDC with a mandate for improving access to its services.

This strategy will spell out how SLDC will make a real and measurable difference for service users and how it will address current inequalities. It will build on clear evidence and act on what you, the customer, have been telling us.

You can obtain copy of this document in different formats (large print, Braille, audio, or in a different language) by calling 0845 050 4434 ext. 7102.

The Scheme is also available on the website: www.southlakeland.gov.uk

South Lakeland District Council welcomes feedback on all aspects of this strategy – if you would like to comment please do so at the following address:

Policy Officer (Equalities)
Strategy and Performance
South Lakeland House
Lowther Street
Kendal
LA9 4UF

Telephone: 0845 050 4434 ext. 7102
Email: policy@southlakeland.gov.uk

SLDC has a Complaints/Compliments procedure – this can be accessed from the website or leaflets can be picked up at the main Council offices (page 38). Alternatively you can call the Contact Centre on 0845 050 4434.

Further details and information on improving access issues can be found on www.southlakeland.gov.uk

Design and Print by Cypher   www.cypherdigital.co.uk
1.0 What do we mean by “Access to Services”?

1.1 Access means different things to different people – for some, ease and convenience of physical access and face to face contact is important. Others would prefer the Council minimises costs and offers contact in the cheapest and most cost efficient way – for example by the internet and telephone. Yet others would like to see Council officers working flexibly to deliver services when they are needed, rather than just between 9-5, Monday to Friday.

1.2 Our work with service users, business partners, government agencies, SLDC staff and the general public have shaped our approach to improving access along the following principles:

- Taking the customer experience as the starting point in reorganising Council services, systems and processes – letting the customer’s needs lead the process of change
- Making it as easy as possible for customers to contact SLDC
- Ensuring that, in most cases, customers can have their queries answered in full first time
- Ensuring a range of methods and locations are available for contacting the Council – for example telephone, internet and being able to meet with a person
- Developing reliable, consistent and responsive services
- Working with our partners so queries can be answered by a range of organisations at one point
- Ensuring that suitable access can be provided for all members of the community – for example upgrading our facilities for wheelchair users
- Being accountable for the service we deliver – providing customers with service standards to improve quality of service
- Promoting the work the Council does so customers are better informed.

2.0 The challenges to overcome

2.1 What do our local residents say? SLDC commissioned a comprehensive customer survey amongst local residents in South Lakeland in June 2007 (appendix 1). The survey included a telephone survey of 1500 people on how they currently experience SLDC services, as well as their views on how we could improve. To complement this information we ran an online survey, several focus groups and used a “Mystery shopper” to test our current service provision.

2.2 The key findings indicated that:

- You want us to specify and publish service standards so we are accountable to you for what we deliver
- You want to be able to contribute to and influence the decisions the Council makes
- You want us to provide clear information and make it easy to complain if you feel we have failed to deliver an adequate service.

2.3 You told us that the telephone is the preferred method of contacting the Council. However you want us to improve our telephone handling by:

- Answering quickly
- Providing a person (rather than a machine) to answer the phone
- Being able to answer your query fully first time and not be passed around.

2.4 Some of you prefer to visit our offices and talk to staff personally. When visiting our offices you would like to be able to see an officer without having to wait in a long queue. You would like Council offices situated in your local area so you don’t have to travel to Kendal for help and advice.

2.5 Over half of those surveyed have access to the internet at home, however 85% haven’t used the Council website to resolve queries, download information or complete forms.

2.6 Our Mystery shopper survey contacted all Council departments by telephone, email, letter and in person at our offices to test our responses. There was a mixed response rate amongst different departments with a range of approaches to dealing with these queries. The Council will address this and aims to provide a consistent and reliable response whoever the customer contacts.

2.7 We also asked our staff for their views. They told us:

- The Council needs to improve its internal communications – staff need to be better informed on what’s happening in other departments
- The Council should promote the services it provides better
- The Council should listen more to customers in order to provide better services
- Service could be improved by putting more resources into customer departments and focusing Council procedures around the customer.
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3.0 Responding to the challenge

3.1 Designing our services around customer needs
SLDC, through the projects highlighted below, seek to provide a service based on the following principles:

- We will design our services, starting with an understanding of our customers, to meet their needs and ours.
- We will not ask customers to give us information more than once.
- Navigation through the system is our responsibility, not the customers.
- Customers will often have more choice of how to approach us and we will be clear when and why we are not offering a choice.
- We will resolve customers’ issues and concerns when they present them to us or clearly explain when resolution will be achieved.

3.2 The Council has developed a Transformation Board to work on improving access to services – the board are working on the following priorities taken from the customer and stakeholder feedback:

- Ongoing and focused consultation with customers.
- Redesign of services around customer needs.
- Greater use made of the telephone and internet.
- Better promotion of Council services.
- Corporate customer care training for all staff.

3.3 The projects will deliver a fundamental change in the way the Council works – this involves a four step process:

Firstly, understanding our communities needs – what do local people want from their public services? What do we, and our partners, provide to fulfil those needs?

Secondly, to challenge ourselves. Where do we fall short in providing efficient services to you? Are we needlessly duplicating services with our partners?

Thirdly, we must re-design our services based on our knowledge of the local community and its needs as well as our partners’ role.

Finally, this will result in changing our delivery so we work with partners, where possible, in delivering a “one stop shop” service for local services.

SLDC Corporate Plan, Customer Access Strategy and the Community Strategy: www.southlakeland.gov.uk
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4.0 Work in progress

The following projects are designed to tackle service users concerns and provide an excellent customer service for all who use South Lakeland District Council services.

4.1 Council re-structure
Over Winter 2008/09 SLDC are restructuring its departments to enable it to focus more clearly on the customer. The objectives of the restructure are to:

- Build capacity
- Break through barriers between teams and individuals
- Focus employees minds on the customer
- Re-balance the Council to set customers and communities at the fore-front.

4.2 Contact Centre
Central to the programme of change and improvement is a Contact Centre that is fit for purpose and which enables efficiencies to be delivered and to improve service quality outcomes for our communities.

SLDC have invested in staff training and development, improved technology, a review of processes to enable a streamlined and faster response to customers and ongoing work to deliver all Council services from one point.

Performance has improved – for example the average wait for a switchboard call to be answered in June 2007 was 45 seconds, in June 2008 it was down to 18 seconds.

4.3 One stop shops
SLDC are actively pursuing the development of Council Contact Centres in a number of locations in the district and the emphasis is very much on tailoring these to fit with the specific needs of each community. For example, the Council are looking at a larger facility in Ulverston and a premises in Kirkby Lonsdale for 2009.

The next steps are to involve local Councils and residents in deciding the right facility and the right location to suit local needs.

4.4 Improving Council performance
SLDC is undertaking a major exercise in simplifying, where possible, all the various steps undertaken in providing a service – from the first customer telephone call to resolution. The aim is to deliver all services through one point (the Contact Centre) and this has the dual effect of making it easier for the customer to carry out transactions whilst costing less for Council tax payers.

The Council is also developing a “need led” approach which focuses its service provision around the needs of customers. The aim is to provide services that respond flexibly to customer requirements, rather than asking customers to fit in with traditional Council ways of working. This project will lead to partnership working, shared assets and knowledge across Cumbria. Pilot projects will include a study of over 60’s and their access needs in rural areas.

4.5 Customer satisfaction (NI14)
The Council is analysing the kind of enquiries we get from customers in order to improve our information so customers don’t have to contact us without real cause. This will lead to better quality information and will contribute to making SLDC more efficient by reducing our time spent on telephone calls.

In order to design our services around customer’s we measure customer satisfaction rates. One way we are doing this is by using a simple press button device customers can use on their way out of the building to indicate how good (or bad) they rated the service they received. This information will be used to improve service and drive up standards.
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4.6 Improving information and databases
The Council is working on its gazetteer (a database of all land and property units in South Lakeland) to link all property information to one database. The system will allow members of the public to view a range of information on their property via the Council’s website.

4.7 Improving mapping and reference information
SLDC are developing their GIS capability to increase the quality and quantity of information available online and to improve the system both for staff and the public. The following objectives have been completed:
- Improved web mapping and “Find my nearest” facility (listing a greater variety of services on the website)
- Uploading of census data onto the website – providing comprehensive ward information
- Customers can now access information regarding planning and building control applications
- The use of interactive maps to enable members of the public to examine local proposals such as the Local Plan.

4.8 www.southlakeland.gov.uk
The Council’s website has a key role to play in SLDC’s commitment to improved customer access.

An attractive, easy to use, practical and up to the minute website will help achieve higher usage as well as taking the pressure off Contact Centre and Council officers.

- The website was re-designed in 2007
- The new site integrates Council, Business and Tourism in a contemporary branded design
- The emphasis has been on ease of use and with improved navigation, search, visual aids, accessible templates, website translations and increased provision of services online.

4.9 Equality and Diversity
The Council is improving access to its services for everyone, and this includes minority groups such as disabled people, older and younger people and ethnic minorities. We are training staff and members in working more effectively with minority groups and our officers are assessing all areas of the Council to ensure that services are delivered equitably and fairly.

Physical access to Council buildings is also a priority and the Council has a programme of improvements planned.
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4.0 Work in progress continued...

4.10 Managing information effectively
Information is a vital part of good customer service. The Council, through its Information Strategy, will have relevant information which is easily accessible and retrievable as well as secure. The Information Technology Unit is working to develop an "Information Unit" which will:
- Provide structured information
- Remove duplication
- Comprehensively classify and index information held
- Improved accessibility to information for front line staff
- Capture intelligence – about the community, citizens and customers, to inform the Council and its policy making process.

For the customer, this will mean:
- a consistent and simpler experience
- savings and efficiencies achieved
- able to resolve multiple queries in one place
- changes to your details will need to be made only once
- location of Contact Centres can be informed by knowledge of service usage and service demand in each location
- data sharing between service providers in Cumbria will become easier resulting in a wide range of queries across public services able to be resolved in one place.

4.11 Cumbria Information Hub
Working with other Cumbrian local authorities SLDC has set up a website which deals with all Cumbrian Council services.

The Hub provides:
- A one stop shop to all citizens in Cumbria
- A county-wide A to Z
- Access to a range of services.

4.12 In partnership with the Cumbria County Council, SLDC are investigating using “local area partnerships” (LAP’s) as a potential solution in delivering improvements for local people using the diversity and knowledge of existing communities. This project is developing and information will be updated regularly on the website.

4.13 The Council is working on raising its profile in South Lakeland by producing information booklets on Council services, a customer charter detailing service standards and by making it easier to comment, compliment or complain about Council services.

4.14 SLDC have produced a “People Strategy” which aims to improve the authority’s skills base through a comprehensive staff development programme. Customer care training is a key part of this strategy.

These projects are scheduled to complete in 2011 – this strategy will then be reviewed, and progress documented in a revised strategy.
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