FOREWORD
Merton is a council with big ambitions and the determination to become an excellent council. One of the ways that we will achieve this is by putting our customers first – in other words, making sure we organise what we do around customer needs.

This customer services strategy shows how we intend to do that and how we will build on the work we have already done. For example, we have a customer contact centre, Merton Link, that provides access to all council services face to face through our One Stop Shop and by telephone through the new call centre.

We are continually reviewing our corporate structures to reflect the importance of the customer and our performance management framework is becoming increasingly geared to monitor issues that are ‘real’ for customers.

We are also working more closely with partner agencies such as the police, health organisations and the voluntary sector to make sure our services ‘join up’ for the benefit of local people. The Merton Partnership is the formal way that we all come together. The partnership is currently working on a Community Plan, to be finalised in April 2005, that will set out a ten year vision for the borough based on the priorities of Merton’s people.

This document describes how, over the next two years, we will continue and develop our work to put the customer first. In doing so, we will be mindful of the responsible use of taxpayers’ money. We recognise that customer services are provided by customers’ money and we will use this responsibly. We will offer effective frontline services as efficiently as we can.

Ged Curran
Chief Executive

Councillor Andrew Judge
Leader of Merton Council

"Better Services – Supporting Our Staff – Because Outcomes Matter"
INTRODUCTION

What this strategy is about

This strategy sets out how Merton Council will interact with its customers over the next two years – until 2006. It is concerned with how the council’s customers contact the council, how they find out about services, how they access services and how the council responds to their needs in ways and at times that suit them.

The strategy takes account of local priorities, such as better integration with other local service providers, and requirements of central government, such as the need to provide all services electronically by 2005. It shows how people and technology will be developed to provide high quality customer services.

It also covers the standards that customers can expect from the council and its staff.

The strategy is presented in three main sections:

- **Customer Focus Culture.** This looks at who customers are and why they are at the heart of all that we do.
- **Contact with customers – customer access.** This is about how we will make sure that all customers have good access to services.
- **Customer care standards.** This section explains our ‘promises’ to customers about the way we deal with them.

Where appropriate, this document notes actions in hand or planned to take this strategy forward.

**What is customer service?**
The term 'customer service' covers a range of activity such as:
- providing services
- providing information
- transactions with customers – for example paying benefits or receiving payments from them
- consulting and engaging customers.

**Customer Focus Culture**
Merton Council’s aim is to become “an authority which consistently provides a customer focused approach – one that is joined up, of the highest quality, proactive and corporate”.

**Who are our customers?**
Our customers include all members of the public who live in Merton, who visit Merton, or who may be passing through; business and external partners, such as the police or health organisations. Some of our customers may be ‘reluctant’ customers, for example someone who has been sectioned under

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the Mental Health Act or the parents of a child on the Child Protection Register.

We also have internal customers such as councillors and other members of staff.

**Why customers come first**
In the past, public sector organisations often put the needs of the organisation before the needs of the customers. Services were provided in ways that suited the organisation – for example, just during office hours – rather than the customer. By putting the customers first Merton Council is ensuring that services are run for customers and in response to customer needs; the organisation is there to serve the customer, not the other way round.

**How we make sure customers come first**
We will move from being an organisation fragmented by departments and services to one where customer services are the focus of access to all services, including those provided by partner organisations.

Putting the focus on customers means that, within two years:
- services will be accessible to everyone in the community, and provided, as far as is practicable, when, where and how the customer wants them
- there will be a single point of contact – one telephone call or visit will be enough to resolve most enquiries
- services will 'join up' – customers will only need to tell us things about them once and all records (and in future those of partner agencies) will be updated through one point of contact
- customers will be given the correct information and most up to date information at every contact – we will get things 'right first time'.
- services will be personal – built around the needs of the individual.

**How we find out what customers want**
To make sure that we put customers first, we need to know about their views and priorities. We consult customers in a number of ways including:
- ward surveys
- questionnaires
- area forums, focus groups, mystery shoppers and workshops
- internet surveys on the council’s web site
- a residents’ panel consisting of more than 1,000 residents who are representative of the borough as a whole
- a youth forum
- an annual survey of residents.

We ensure that we consult with all sections of the community as well as with stakeholders, partners and other relevant groups.

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CONTACT WITH CUSTOMERS – CUSTOMER ACCESS

How customers access services
There is a range of ways in which customers can access services – we sometimes refer to these as ‘access channels’. Channels include:

- Face to face contact through our One Stop Shop, Merton Link, and other reception points across the borough, such as those in housing offices and libraries.
- Telephone.
- Merton’s web site.
- Kiosks, libraries and the People’s Network.
- Letters.
- Fax.
- E-mail.
- Text messages.

How we will improve access
We will consult customers to ensure that services are provided, as far as is practicable, where, how and when customers want them. This will involve how much they will cost and who should pay – the Council Tax payer or the customer. Services will be provided through any of the access channels listed above and will include opening hours across all services. Individual needs, such as translation services, will be met.

We will consider the need for a network of customer contact centres. It is likely that this network will consist of one main centre in the Civic Centre (which is already open through Merton Link) and three satellite or mobile centres which, if a need is identified, will be open in three to four years.

A centralised telephone and ICT (information communications technology) system will allow us to manage enquiries better as it will mean that we can respond to peaks and troughs in demand regardless of the physical location of employees.

Services supported by technology
Technology holds the key to the successful implementation of this strategy. It will make services more accessible to customers and provide staff with more information, more quickly about services and a range of issues that will help them to deal with enquiries. In this way enquires will generally be dealt with at the first point of contact a customer has with the council. The elements of this technology will be:

- Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software. This will enable the council to build up a profile of customers and record enquiries through to resolution to make sure there is no ‘unfinished business’. We have been
examining different options for this and aim to implement CRM by December 2005.

- **Desk Top Integration software.** This will ensure that customer support officers do not need to access a number of systems in order to respond to customer enquiries. All the main information about customers will be presented to the officers. This will allow staff to respond more quickly to enquiries.

- **People and Property.** This will ensure that we have consistent information about all the borough’s residents and that all systems will be updated when a customer notifies the council of a change in their circumstances.

- **Document management.** This enables us to scan all documents received by the council, allowing it to be made available electronically and shared by departments, thus reducing duplication.

- **Web access.** We are looking at ways to improve the design, accessibility, navigation and ‘self help’ on the council’s web site. This will include interactive forms, for example for job applications or payments and booking systems and so on. A range of improvements will be in place by December 2005.

- **Other self help.** We will be looking at the use of self help kiosks located around the borough, for example in supermarkets, schools and libraries.

*Working with partners*

To ensure seamless service delivery across all community services, we will work with partners such as the police and health organisations. The Community Plan and the Merton Partnership are at the heart of this partnership working.

We will build on the work done with the Merton Link Partnership Area to ensure that more partners are represented in Merton Link.

We will work with the Citizen’s Advice Bureau to increase the take up of welfare benefits which customers may be entitled to.

We will identify areas where partners can more effectively deliver some of our services. For example, the Libraries Bookstart initiative is currently being delivered through health visitors.

*When can customers access services?*

Our aim is for customers to be able to contact us 24 hours a day where this is appropriate and possible.

Customer contact centres will have extended opening hours to make sure that they are open at times that suit customers.

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What resources are needed to ensure good access?

Human resources
Well trained, valued and committed staff are essential to the provision of quality customer services. We will build on the work already done in connection with Investors in People to ensure that, through effective training and development programmes, all staff have the skills and knowledge to do their jobs and understand the importance of putting the customer first.

Financial resources
- Money for the technical developments needed is included in the council's implementing e-government (IEG) statement. This is available on the council's website www.merton.gov.uk/ieg.
- The resources for other aspects of this strategy are contained in plans listed in Annex 1.
- Where the council does not have the capacity or expertise to meet the requirements of this strategy, we will explore the use of external funding and/or partnership working. Another option would be to share resources with another council or agency. We will look at external providers as a matter of course in looking at service improvement.
- Savings will be achieved through the effective use of resources, for example better use of our buildings, staff and information technology.
- Savings will be achieved through business process re-engineering – changing what we do and the way we do it with the aim of being more efficient. An example of this is the Fujitsu Sense and Respond initiative which is looking at back office processes for housing benefit, council tax, student support and Merton Link to see if efficiencies can be introduced.
- Adopting a 'right first time' approach to the delivery of services will also secure savings. The use of CRM will assist in this as will a better understanding of the effects of certain actions – for example sending council tax reminders all at the same time results in increased demand on Merton Link.
- Making it easier and more attractive for customers to move away from expensive face to face services to telephone and self help.

Making it happen
A corporate steering group and a project team will oversee the delivery of this strategy.

We will set up sounding boards for front line staff, customers and stakeholders and we will develop 'customer first circles'.

Objectives
In two years' time we will have

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• higher levels of customer satisfaction with customers confident that we
listen and react to their needs to ensure that services reflect what they
want

• higher level of customer satisfaction in the handling of complex queries

• well trained and motivated staff throughout the organisation, who take
ownership of customers' problems and work proactively to resolve these

• a Customer Service Team with Customer Service Advisers who provide:
  o face to face contact at Customer Service Centres across the
    borough with more flexible and extended opening hours
  o up to 24-hour contact with the public by telephone and e-mail
  o a seamless service across all relevant agencies.

• a pattern of service delivery that is flexible and meets our residents needs
  – with some services operating over a broader range of hours

• using various Information and Communications Technology (ICT) solutions
to ensure consistency of service with the ability to handle and respond to
enquiries at any location

• 100 per cent of all services delivered electronically, where appropriate

• new technologies more accessible to all residents.

CUSTOMER CARE STANDARDS
Whenever customers have contact with Merton Council they will receive
consistently high standards of customer care and service. These standards
will ensure that all sections of our diverse and multi-cultural community have
full access to all services.

Our standards
Services must be:

• Clear - the customer must know what the service is, when it is available
  and how it is available.

• Consistent – meeting performance targets.

• Challenging - changing where necessary and continually improving.

• Inclusive - accessible to all community groups.

• Offering choice - customers should be able to access services when they
  want and in the way they want, as far as is practicable.

In doing this, the council will match the upper quartile performance of London
boroughs by:

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• responding to all initial correspondence within 15 working days

• responding to all initial e-mails and texts within 15 working days

• responding to all first complaints within 15 working days

• responding to all Freedom of Information requests within 20 working days and Data Protection requests within 40 calendar days

• answering 85 per cent of telephone calls within 5 rings

• answering 95 per cent of calls within 10 rings

• seeing customers within 30 minutes at any access point

• providing up to 24/7 access to services across all services, where appropriate.

Annex 2 has more details about the council’s Customer Care Standards.

**Communicating the standards to staff and customers**

Everyone working in the council needs to be aware of the importance of customer service. The council is committed to providing support and training to staff at all levels. Internal communications, for example, the council’s intranet sites and regular manager-staff meetings are used to keep staff informed about services.

The council’s communication strategy addresses the need to make sure customers are informed about services, about how to make complaints and about how to make their views known. This involves a range of communications methods including information leaflets, work with local media, advertising and the council’s web site.

**Making sure the whole council delivers the standards**

Every council department incorporates corporate and departmental service standards in their own service plans. Other service standards in respect of specific services can be found in individual departmental services plans and the council’s Business Plan *Merton, the Next Three Years*. These are listed at Annex 1 and are available from [www.merton.gov.uk](http://www.merton.gov.uk). Links between the Customer Services Strategy and these other plans are illustrated at Annex 3.

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Checking that the standards are delivered
The plans and strategies that underpin this strategy will be monitored through the council's performance management framework. We will monitor performance through all access channels.

Surveys of customers will check to see if we are perceived as an organisation that delivers quality services and external judgements on our performance will be made by agencies such as the Audit Commission. We will also seek the views of partner organisations on our performance.

CONTACT DETAILS
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