

# Customer Access Strategy

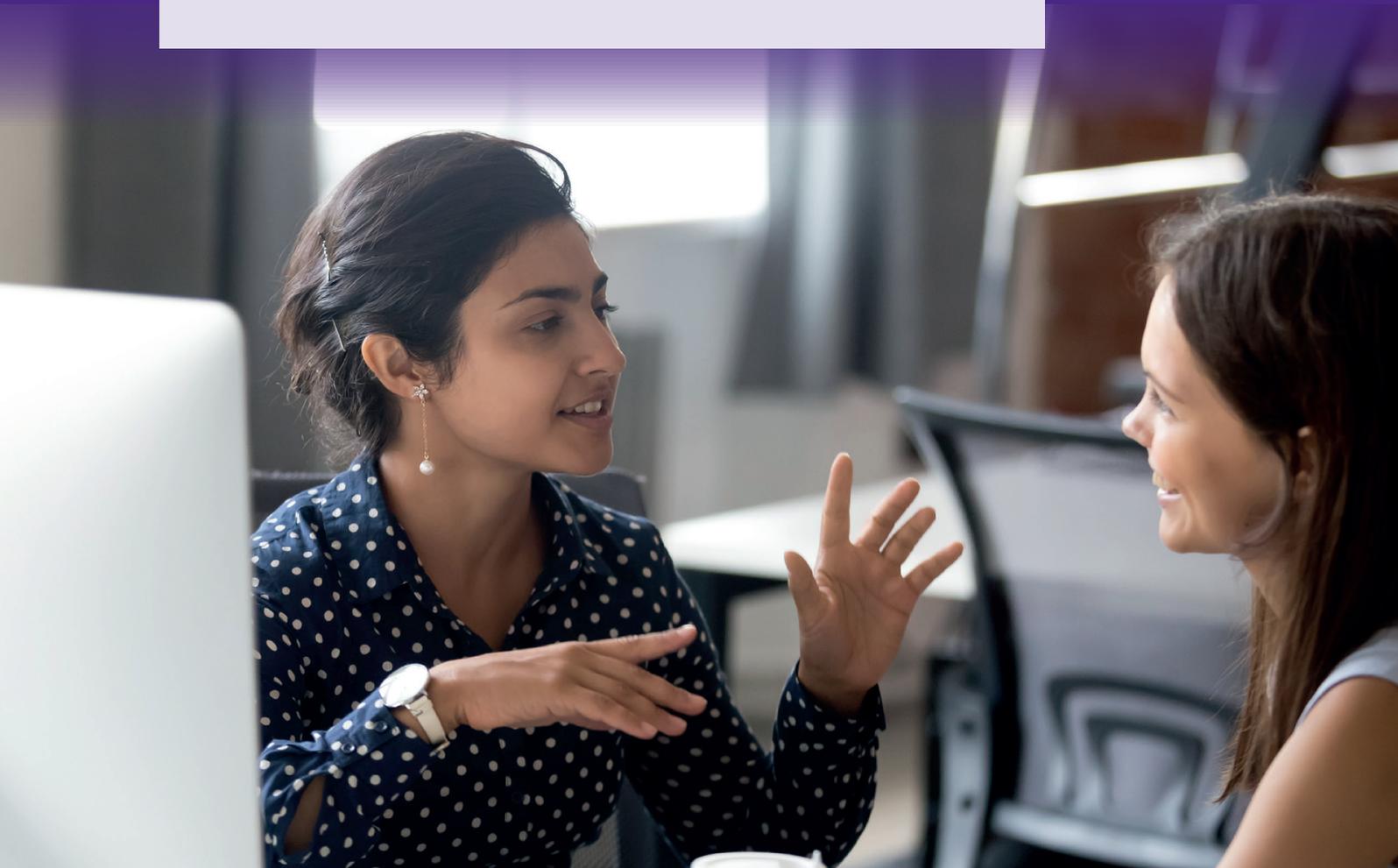
Folkestone & Hythe District Council

2026 – 2029



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# Our vision

## Foreword by Cllr Fuller

We are proud to introduce the next phase of our Customer Access Strategy for the period 2026-2029.

Our previous Customer Access Strategy focused on the ways that both internal and external customers access and transfer information and championed a digital by default approach. This next phase of the strategy instead places a key focus on digital by choice and multi-channel access. The strategy is designed to ensure that every resident can access the services they need – how and when it suits them best.



We recognise that the preferred method of contact for the majority of our customers is to transact with us online and we aim to make this as simple, intuitive and efficient as possible. Equally, we know that not everybody will want to, or be able to, communicate with us in this way which is why we will ensure that there is provision for customers to access all of our services by more traditional methods of contact such as by telephone or in person.

In response to the cost of living crisis and current housing shortage, we have seen a significant rise in the number of customers requiring enhanced support. To meet the needs of our customers, the way we work must be as flexible and responsive as possible. We recognise that no two customer interactions are the same, and we are committed to delivering a personalised, needs-based approach to ensure that every customer receives the right support at the right time.

Digital services will continue to be improved with new areas explored to ensure that contacting us is as simple as possible for our customers, with a goal of enabling as many enquiries as possible to be resolved at the first point of contact. This will enable resources to be directed to those customers who require additional help and support. Access to our services physically is integral to the strategy and we will continue to review the services offered at our Customer Access Point so that they evolve to meet the needs of our customers.

As we prepare for the forthcoming Local Government Reorganisation, we remain fully committed to maintaining the delivery of our services throughout the transition period, ensuring continuity and reliability for all of our residents. We are committed to ensuring that every resident can access the services they need, in a way that suits them best, as we continue to adapt and improve our approach to meet the evolving needs of our community. Our goal is to ensure that the service we provide remains relevant and resilient in a rapidly changing landscape.

### **Cllr Fuller**

Cabinet Member for Resident Engagement & Accountability at Folkestone & Hythe District Council

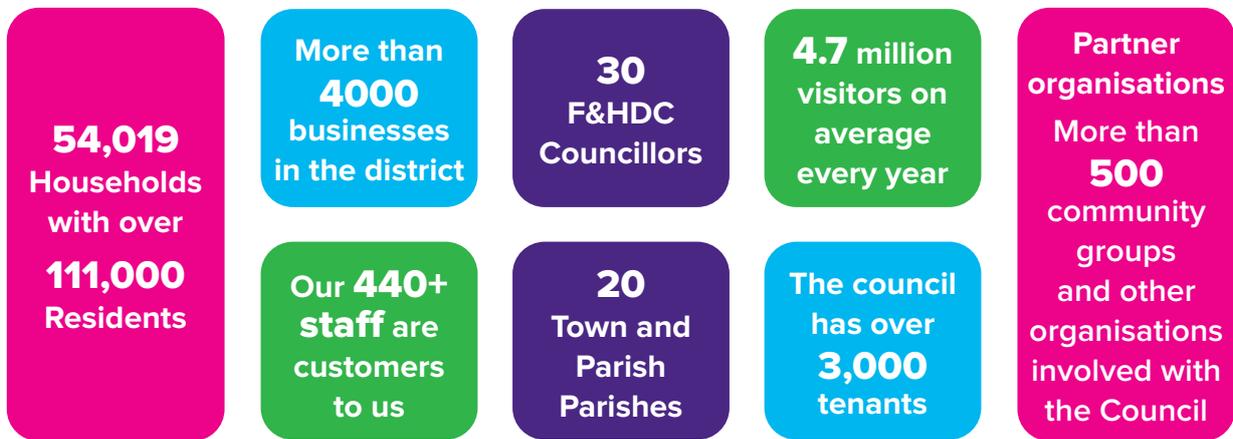
# Customer service principles



We aim to ensure that our services are easy to access for all our residents with updates and progress notifications provided regardless of how a customer has contacted us. We will offer alternative methods of contact to customers who are unable to transact with us online, while also assisting those who wish to improve their digital communication skills. We are committed to continuous improvement, regularly seeking feedback to enhance our services.

These 10 design principles not only underpin the Customer Access Strategy, but they are an important part of our day to day work in ensuring we continually strive to deliver the best service possible to our customers.





## Who are our customers?

A large percentage of our customers are residents in our district and the majority of our focus is around supporting them. However, we consider other groups who have contact with us as customers too. These include businesses, other councils, government departments, visitors, partner organisations, staff, councillors, media and more. All of our customers should have a choice in how they interact with the Council and there will be consistency in the service provided irrespective of the method of contact.

## Customer Feedback

When looking at improving the service we provide to our customers, we listen to ensure we are delivering what the customer needs and not what we believe they need. We have captured specific customer feedback on how we could improve access to our services. We have listed some of the key comments below and will continue to seek customer feedback to help us design and deliver our services in the future.

“ When the phone lines are busy there is no way to speak to anyone or leave a message. ”

“ Better and easier website to navigate, maybe consider an app. ”

“ Too many services seem to be only online, more telephone support needs to be available. ”

“ More signposting and community information should be available in reception area. ”

“ Requests can require chasing – clear updates and progress notifications are needed. ”

“ 24/7 availability – my time is important and I need to access services outside of working hours. ”

“ It should be easier to find key information and updates on projects and priorities. ”

“ Online services are efficient but more dedicated phone/paper channels are needed. ”

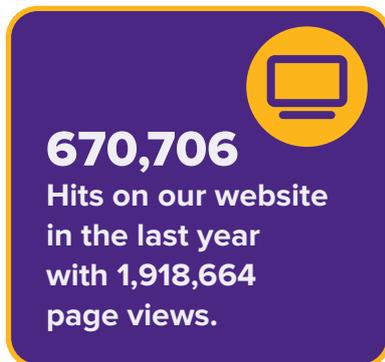
“ Clearer response time targets so residents know when they will receive an update or a decision. ”

# Our story so far

Our strategy for 2020-2023 resulted in numerous improvements such as 81.36% of households in the district now having a MyAccount and 385 additional online forms and processes. Our continuous drive towards service improvements has led to a reduction in telephone calls for many areas. Many customers are choosing to contact us digitally which enables us to dedicate resources towards supporting those customers who may need additional help.

Our Customer Access Point at the Civic Centre provides access to online self-service devices, to ensure efficient processing of information, whilst encouraging customers to embrace and be more confident in using online services.

Our contact to us by online forms and processes now outweighs any other channel.



# Customer access strategy plan of action

Although the first phase of the strategy achieved some very successful results, in line with our ethos of continuous improvement, this future look of the strategy is ambitious.



The aim of the strategy has been informed by both internal and external engagement and will build upon existing achievements.

The focus will be on the following areas, all of which will be measured by customer satisfaction, service delivery and accessibility.



# Customer contact channels: Present methods and future directions

Channel	Current use	Future plans
<p><b>Online</b></p> 	<p>Most of our customers prefer accessing services online at their convenience.</p> <p>The majority of our services are already available digitally. We also provide support through our webchat platform for many of our services.</p>	<p>We will review and enhance the digital journey for simplicity and seamlessness.</p> <p>We plan to introduce progress updates and case closure updates. Push notifications, and real-time progress will be explored throughout this phase of the strategy.</p>
<p><b>Telephone</b></p> 	<p>We have seen a sizeable reduction in calls as more of our services have been made available online. Increasingly, customers are choosing to engage with us through digital channels.</p>	<p>We expect this reduction to continue as we improve services. We will continue to monitor call volumes and explore messaging/call back options to ensure that customers can easily contact us.</p>
<p><b>In person</b></p> 	<p>Over the last few years, we have seen a reduction in customers coming into our offices as more of our services have been made available online.</p>	<p>We will be reviewing the service delivery model of our Customer Access Point to ensure that the focus on assisted self-serve is the right one for our customers.</p>
<p><b>Social media</b></p> 	<p>Social media is used to communicate service updates, district news, and critical alerts (e.g., weather disruptions). Customers also use it to provide feedback and alert us of any problems in the district.</p>	<p>We will continue promoting social media for communication and engagement.</p>

# Summary of expectations

- Customer updates and notifications will be explored with the intention of customers receiving progress updates and case closures in real time
- Ability to easily transact online in as fewest steps as possible; review of website to be undertaken
- Digital skills workshops. We will provide our own tailored support and also partner with organisations to provide digital skills training support
- Provide online digital signature capabilities
- Encourage customer feedback for continuous improvement
- Review Customer Access Point operating model

## How will we know we have achieved this?

- Ongoing work plans with higher volume areas being prioritised
- Website review undertaken with each council department and using customer feedback
- Digital workshops programme to be implemented
- Form suitability to be reviewed and online signatures implemented where appropriate
- External feedback and survey responses to be reviewed monthly, mystery shopping implemented to assess processes and customer service
- Feedback and data to be used to make informed decisions and implement improvements
- Review of Customer Access Point provision to be undertaken by September 2026

# Customer access strategy action plan

We will monitor the progress of the strategy against agreed goals and timescales. The primary focus of the strategy is fostering a culture of service excellence. Delivering the best possible experience for our customers takes precedence over meeting previously held channel shift targets such as increased online take up and reduction in call volumes.

The action plan covers the period 2025-2028 and aligns with our Corporate Plan in ensuring that we support people in need and deliver services that are easy for everyone to access. The focus is on the first year as developments and achievements then will lay the foundation for the entire strategy. By focusing on these actions in the first year, we can build a strong base for further improvement and innovations in the following years.

Years two and three will be further expanded throughout the lifespan of the strategy.



# Year 1

- We will explore improved enquiry and case updates for customers with a goal of real time update and closures being implemented in as many areas as possible
- All of our forms will be reviewed with digital signature capabilities being added where appropriate
- We will review the operating model of our Customer Access Point
- Our feedback and continuous improvement mechanisms will be scrutinised with monthly reviews in place. A working group will be implemented to assess external and internal feedback and mystery shopping will also be put in place to enable us to independently assess our services. Findings and changes made will be published on our website
- We will publish and promote a simple sign up method for customers to contact us to express an interest to participate in user groups for testing and reviewing processes and systems
- Implement enhanced training programmes for staff to improve both customer service skills and knowledge
- We will ensure our screen reader compatibility and hearing loop systems are of the highest possible standard
- We will review our language support services to ensure that they provide the best service to our staff and customers whilst delivering value for money

**All of these goals will be measured against an action plan with progress updates published on our website.**



## Year 2 – Initial targets

- Our website will be reviewed in conjunction with internal departments and using customer feedback
- We will develop a programme of digital skills workshops by delivering both our own tailored support and partnering with other organisations
- Review of our 20 highest volume online processes and forms to be completed to ensure the simplest customer journey is in place
- Use data analytics to monitor service demand to ensure data driven decision making results in reduced wait times
- Promote more contact through social media by proactively promoting our social media platforms to increase their use to help us communicate with our customers more effectively

## Year 3 – Initial targets

- Review of all of our online processes and forms to be completed to ensure the simplest customer journey is in place
- Exploratory work regarding voicebot and chatbot implementation to be completed
- Exploratory work regarding artificial intelligence search engines on the website to be completed
- Review of our signposting and working practices with other key front facing organisation to be completed and changes implemented to enhance service offerings and community support
- Automated switchboard option to be reviewed to free up staff resources to support those customers who need additional help
- Investigate the use of artificial intelligence on our social media platforms to answer basic enquiries

# Commitments

## **Our commitment to you**

- Be professional, helpful and courteous
- Do our best to understand your circumstances
- Protect your personal information
- Take responsibility for your enquiry
- Deliver what we promise
- Say sorry and put things right if we get them wrong
- Use plain English and explain things clearly
- Continually review our services by listening to our customers
- Respond to your enquiry within a reasonable time

## **Your commitment to us**

- Treat our staff with respect
- Provide constructive feedback about our services so we can continually improve