Argyll and Bute Council

Comhairle Earra-Ghàidheal agus Bhòid

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE CSE

Building Standards

Customer Engagement Strategy

Argyll and Bute Council
Comhairle Earra-Ghàidheal agus Bhòid
argyll-bute.gov.uk

Argyll Bute COUNCIL

Building Standards

Planning, Housing and Regulatory Services

Customer Engagement Strategy

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1.0 - Introduction

The Building Standards service is a frontline service with a diverse range of customers. Increasing service demands puts pressure on resources and we need to find different ways to deliver services, including better use of digital technology, to be more efficient, yet we provide good customer service. We want to change the way we deliver our service and this Customer Engagement Strategy sets out how we intend to do this.

2.0 – Who are our customers?

As a frontline public service, Building Standards has a wide range of customers with the aim of ensuring that the buildings and spaces we help to create are safe for everyone. Some customers have direct contact with the service in terms of applying and engaging in a variety of Building Standard processes. Others experience the outcomes of these processes through enforcement or through accessing or using these buildings or spaces.

The term "customer" has a broad meaning and is used to describe the various individuals, agents, groups and organisations who interact with the service directly or indirectly, namely:

Direct:	**Indirect**
• Applicants / agents / developers /landowners applying for a variety of building warrant related permissions • Residents or agents requesting pre-application advice • Anyone concerned that the works are unauthorised • Complainants about any aspect of our service • Other professionals and consultants • Other Council services • Partners such as Scottish Fire & Rescue Service, SEPA, etc. • Other Councils and Government agencies • Solicitors	• Neighbours • Community councils and amenity groups • Councillors and their assistants • Those who live, work and visit the buildings and spaces created through the building warrant process • Investors and employers from the outcomes of the building warrant process • Future generations and new residents/businesses, all of whom benefit from decisions – schools, new housing, conservation of historic buildings/areas, etc.

KEY MESSAGE –

OUR CUSTOMER CONTACT CHANNELS NEED TO CONTINUE TO EVOLVE

We have a wide range of customers, often with competing demands, who put pressure on our resources. We need to prioritise our service delivery in line with the Council's Customer Management policies and modernising agenda. This will mean focussing our services to those most needing our advice and directing others to online services.

3.0 – What is engagement?

This document recognises that different approaches are appropriate in different situations. In all cases, communication of information is essential to inform our customers of any proposed change or issue and of any actions they or the Council should take. The provision of clear and concise information is critical and may be the only suitable action in certain circumstances, for example communicating factual information on the Building Warrant application process or formal enforcement action

Effective engagement also includes consultation, although this can be difficult for regulatory services where state largely defines standards and actions. However, Building Standards will seek to engage with our customers to seek opinions and views on changes to our work to inform and enhance developments. This is likely to be time limited exercise and outcomes will be clearly communicated with our customers.

Communication = Engagement
Communication + Consultation + Communication = Engagement

As part of our Customer Engagement Strategy, we want to improve how we engage with our customers so that they feel they have had a proper say even if they do not agree with the final outcomes.

4.0 – Consulting with our customers

Public participation is at the heart of good customer engagement and it is important that we have robust and clear systems in place to ensure effective consultation on a range of subjects. However it must be noted that there is no provision for public consultation on the processing of Building Warrant applications

A key aspect of effective consultation is getting the communication right at the beginning of the process to help raise awareness of the opportunity to comment and to respond to feedback.

Guidance
Building Standards guidance, whether statutory or non-statutory, requires effective consultation to ensure acceptance of the basic principles of the guidance and adds weight to our decisions. Responding to customer feedback, an "Argyll and Bute Council – Do I need a Building Warrant?" was produced and is posted on the Councils website. The Building Standards pages of the Council's website is the central point for all our guidance and documentation. Anyone can access this information via the website. Customers can respond via the website. We will make use of our webpages in publicising training events to ensure participation is as wide as possible.

5.0 – Communicating with our customers

Argyll and Bute Building Standards has always been a forward thinking service in terms of innovation in information and communication technology. We were one of the first Councils to introduce an eBuilding Warrant system, this facility now provided by the Scottish Government Portal, to embrace digital technology and pioneered Remote Verification Inspections (RVI's) to meet customer and service needs over Covid, and have continued with RVI's being part of our suite of surveyor actions. This is particularly important in meeting customer demands in rural and island communities.

Currently we provide a number of ways where customers can interact with us. Through the increasing use of digital technology we are seeing significant changes to how people consume and interact with information. Whilst we already make good use of this change in the information we offer, there are greater opportunities to expand the use of digital communications (including MS Teams, a new digital reception at Council offices etc.), increasing participation and improving accessibility. The use of digital technology is important but running in tandem are alternatives for customers who are uncomfortable using digital.

The volumes of contact have increased over the years, and, in the context of a Council seeking transformational change in service provision, has introduced the Customer Service Centre and Customer Service Points.

- Current means of communication
- Council website
- Virtual meetings and use of MS Teams/Skype
- Remote Verification Inspections (RVI's)
- Emails- we have our own generic Building Standards mailboxes to assist customers in contacting us
- Telephone
- One to one meetings
- Newsletters
- On-line user forum
- Guidance Notes
- Customer/Agent User Forums- these are now, following customer feedback, held annually and via MS Teams.

There are multiple communication pathways whereby customers can access advice on various aspects of Building Standards. These different channels can be resource intensive and Customers are encouraged to use web access in the first instance, although direct contact with the customer management centre or officers, will be actioned. Promoting a self-serve culture encourages Channel Shift in line with the Council's transformational change programme and supports the new hybrid ways of working, where officers are not wholly located and working form offices.

Moving customers to find the information online allows Building Standards staff to concentrate on their core business and respond to customers whilst working remotely from offices. However, this has to be balanced with the customers' needs and our role in managing the sustainable economic growth of Argyll and Bute. Giving a full advice service on major developments is still a top priority and there will still be complex building warrant applications, dangerous/defective building and enforcement cases where advice and guidance at one to one level is required. Advice on more straightforward cases will be dealt with on a case by case basis but the aim will be to direct the enquirer to the Council website for the information. This includes general enquires where stakeholders want us to confirm whether a proposal needs a Building Warrant; in many cases, they can make the assessment themselves and make the appropriate applications. Updating and revising our information on our website is critical.

KEY MESSAGE -
OUR CUSTOMER CONTACT CHANNELS NEED TO CHANGE
Communication channels will change so that our customers are able to self-serve to find the information they need. Information will be improved and online forms will be available if the customer has been unable to find the information and still needs advice from us. A full pre-application advice service will still be provided for applications and other complex cases. We will make more use of digital technology to enhance the customer experience.

Service delivery post pandemic is considerably different, although the provision of services to customers is at the core of our service. Building Standards continue to improve and develop new ways of working to engage with customers and improve services. Key achievements in 2023 include:

- Remote Verification inspections now embedded in our suite of customer engagement tools.
- A digital receptionist is now available across Council offices at Helensburgh and Kilmory, to improve access to services when the customer service point are closed
- We issued service newsletters to our customers when required.
- The majority of staff are working on a hybrid model (homeworking/office/site) and able to access all systems, as if they were in an office
- Extended our use of technology to allow interactive meetings and site inspections via MS Teams and Skype
- Face-to-face meetings were available for customers to meet officers where necessary within Council offices or on site.
- Our website was amended to include current contact details and general updates to service information.
- Project to upgrade and improve our electronic document management system is ongoing
- Works were initiated to develop a new information management system (Enterprise) which will assist in managing workloads and workflow processes. This will ensure that our customer focus and performance approach is not adversely impacted should the decision be taken to change of document management system.
- We delivered our first on-line Customer User Forum on the 29th March 2023 and a specific targeted User Forum to a major building contractor on the 12th January 2024.
- We carried out more detailed analysis of “Near-me” package, which provides a low-data usage alternative to MS Teams and Skype for on-line video meetings and remote verification inspections

Future Improvements

- We will continue with work to implement a new Electronic Document system and minimise the impact to service delivery and customers
- We will continue to improve our website with interactive links to help the customer find the information
- Produce easy read 'quick guides' for a variety of common enquiries, as required
- We are considering digitising all historic information and files, moving away from microfiche.
- The roll out of MS365 tools across Building Standards
- Implement the "Near Me", which provides a low-data usage options for customers for on-line video meetings and remote verifications.
- Issue service newsletters, when required.
- Arrange the 2024 Building Standards User Forum and engage with customers on how these can be improved
- Participate in the annual Scottish Government Pye-Tate Customer Project which engages with customers and reports on national and local findings.

6.0 – Building Standards information and records

The service retains a large number of historic records which are regularly requested by customers for a variety of purposes such as buying and selling properties. Building Standards records from the late 1990s onwards and forming Part 1 of the Building Standards Register are available online. Otherwise, searches must be done of the historical paper Building Standards registers for information. There is a charge for Building Warrants searches and for copies of documents. Note only relevant parties are permitted to obtain copies of information, plans, etc. retained under Part 2 of the Building Standards register. However, anyone can view the information held on a case at a mutual agreed time.

The information we hold will be in line with legislative requirements, our retention schedules and records management policy. We will publish information online in accordance with this and the Scottish Government's guidance on Publishing Information Online.

Other information not online can be subject to Information requests which are co-ordinated by the Council's FOI team. The Council gathers and processes information about citizens so that services can be delivered effectively and efficiently. The Council's 'Privacy Notice' sets out what to expect when we collect information in line with the Data Protection Act, 1998 and other legislation and how we

handle personal information.

7.0 – Customer journey of the future

Currently the customer has a number of ways they can contact the service to receive information and advice. Building Standards is actively pursuing new opportunities provided by digital to improve the way we engage with our customers. This means

- Building Warrants will continue to be received by the Council electronically through the e- building standards system, although specific support will be provided to customers who have difficulties using the on-line system
- The Building Standards telephone, email , video and face-to-face service will be given to those who need this contact, mainly for live Building Warrant applications, enforcement cases, and dangerous building occurrences
- Telephone calls will be handled by the Customer Service Centre in the first instance with complex issues passed to Building Standards for attention
- Services will be largely online and our website will provide information with customers self-serving to find what they need do
- Improved website information.
- Better use of technology and virtual inspections

We will set out what our customer can expect in our Customer Service Charter.

8.0 – A timetable for action

The strategy will evolve over time. While the success of it depends on a cultural shift by all parties involved Building Standards believe that the focus has to be on the improvement of our own and national online information systems to ensure that our customers can continue to find what they need.

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