

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

17 OCTOBER 2024

**REPORT OF CORPORATE
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

CABINET INFORMATION ITEM

Cabinet Member for Access Communities and Community Safety - Councillor Stephenson

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

SUMMARY

Customer Service Excellence (CSE) is a national quality mark that seeks to reward organisations that demonstrate a customer-focused commitment to all that they do. Certification to the Customer Service Excellence standard is through a rigorous assessment process which includes a review of documents that demonstrate compliance against each element of the standard and an on-site visit to observe practical evidence.

There are 5 criteria that must be satisfied with a number of elements within each. Compliance plus is awarded for elements where particular strength is demonstrated.

Accreditation operates on a 3-year cycle, with a full assessment in year 1 followed up by a 12-month and a 24-month annual review to ensure standards are maintained. Stockton Borough Council has been accredited with Customer Service Excellence since 2010 and has demonstrated continuous improvement through the assessment cycles.

This report details the outcomes of the 24-month review which took place June 2024, and confirms that the Council has retained full certification, achieving full compliance across all 57 aspects of assessment with compliance plus for 17 elements, a further increase of 1 from the 2023 annual review.

Details include how Powering our Future (POF) themes have been prevalent in conversations between the assessor and staff and, in written evidence/examples submitted for assessment. It is positive to note that 8 out of the 17 Compliance Plus points achieved this year, reference how POF themes and projects have demonstrated CSE.

The report includes information about the removal of the CSE accreditation body, UKAS from future external CSE Assessments and details the future delivery CSE Staff Awards, STARS Awards and Think Smart, Think Big scheme.

REASONS FOR PRODUCING THIS REPORT

The purpose of this report is to inform Cabinet of outcome of the Council's 24-month Customer Service Excellence review and to note the ongoing achievements and commitment to CSE across Council Services. The report also starts to consider future delivery of the CSE assessment process and how this can be further integrated into the Council's POF programme and Design Principles.

DETAIL

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE – 24 MONTH REVIEW

1. The Customer Service Excellence standard tests in great depth those areas that research has indicated are a priority for customers, with particular focus on delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism and staff attitude.
2. The framework consists of 57 aspects of assessment grouped across 5 criteria: -
 - Customer Insight
 - Culture of the Organisation
 - Information and Access
 - Delivery
 - Timeliness and Quality of Service
3. In August 2022, a full assessment was undertaken with the Council achieving full compliance with all 57 aspects and a number of compliance plus ratings. The 12-month review in July 2023 confirmed that the Council continued to meet the Customer Service Excellence standards.
4. The 24-month review was carried out this year in June 2024. Documentary evidence was submitted in advance and the assessor was on site for 2 days, meeting staff from a range of Council services who contributed supporting evidence and participated in review meetings with the assessor. The Council has retained full certification, achieving full compliance across all 57 aspects of assessment with compliance plus for 17 elements, a further increase of 1 from the 2023 annual review. Points of compliance plus for 2024 included 7 within Customer Insight, 4 within Culture of the organisation, 4 within Information and Access and 1 within Delivery
5. During the 2024 review, the assessor was complimentary about the quality of the report and evidence submitted and made comments about the energy and enthusiasm of staff across all services and their ongoing dedication to delivery high quality customer services.
6. The assessor specifically highlighted the ongoing digital work of self-serve solutions, including the development of Stockton Information Directory (SID) and, the ability for the customers to access information about roadworks in their areas and across the Borough in real time.
7. It was positive to note that the assessor highlighted that the Power our Future projects confirm the importance of customers and communities – includes the commitment to be 'bold, brave and innovative as a Council. Feedback noted that Powering our Future themes were clearly coming through in conversations with staff and in written evidence/examples and, the Powering of Future evidence has resulted in retaining compliance plus over 8 out of the 17 compliance plus points.
8. The increase of compliance plus points from 6 to 7 in the criteria Customer Insights, was specifically attributed to the Powering our Future programme, which will embed further contact and communication with local communities and businesses.
9. The assessor did not highlight any specific areas of improvement but noted that the Council should continue with customer journey mapping, identifying touchpoints and how customers feel at each of these and how they would like customers to feel. The assessor also acknowledged work to build on good practice of understanding customers wants vs needs and educating customers effectively.
10. This year's assessment completes the 3-year cycle.

CUSTOMER SERVICES EXCELLENCE SCHEME AND ACCREDITATION

11. The Customer Service Excellence scheme was launched in 2008 with governmental backing and the Centre for Assessment is the only CSE assessment body that is UKAS accredited for ISO Standards. The current Scheme has a national quality mark that seeks to reward organisations that demonstrate a customer-focused commitment to all that they do.
12. The Council has been part of the CSE Scheme since 2010 and has demonstrated continuous improvement through the assessment cycles. Certification to the CSE standard is achieved through a rigorous assessment process which includes a review of documents that demonstrate compliance against each element of the standard and an on-site visit to observe practical evidence.
13. The Council has been advised that the Government no longer requires the CSE Standard to be accredited and subsequently UKAS have confirmed that they will withdraw their involvement from 2025. Whilst the Centre of Assessment has told us that there will be no impact on how future assessments are designed and conducted, it does mean that the attainment of CSE standard will no longer have a 'national quality mark' associated with it.
14. There are benefits that the CSE scheme brings without the national quality mark including assessing tangible, measurable inputs, however, the process requires significant resources from the Council. The current assessment process is managed by the Council's Customer Service Team, who spend significant time co-ordinating information across teams and services, collating and submitting evidence for assessment and managing site visits and staff meetings. Staff time is also required across other Council Teams who support and contribute to this piece of work, particularly in year 1 of the cycle, when the full assessment happens. There is also a modest fee associated with the assessment.
15. The Council has maintained and improved its Customer Service Excellence accreditation since 2010 and the principles underpinning the framework are now firmly established in culture and practice. The customer journey and experience are understood and embedded across all Council Services and teams, who feed into our CSE framework. Continuous work will be undertaken to ensure that CSE continues to be integral to future service design and delivery, building on the success of the Council 14-year CSE accreditation.
16. As the Council comes to the end of its current Customer Service Excellence 3-year cycle, it is timely to review the future assessment model and review how the Council will further embed Powering Our Future design principles to ensure an ongoing focus on the customer in all that we do.

STAFF AWARDS - REWARDS & RECOGNITION

17. The annual Staff Awards for Customer Service Excellence were held on 8th February 2025 at ARC. These awards celebrate staff achievements across a number of judged categories recognising employee's outstanding contributions and achievements in Customer Service Excellence. This year, the Council incorporated the 'Stars' Awards which were introduced in 2023, these awards follow staff nominations for colleagues who has done something noteworthy throughout the year
18. Work is currently on going to further consolidate the annual Customer Service Excellence Awards, STARs Awards and embed the Think Smart, Think Big schemes. This piece of work will bring together all these recognition and reward programmes in an annual seamless ceremony, to celebrate colleagues' success together.

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