# Customer Experience Strategy

November 2025

# Contents

# Foreword

At Swale Borough Council, our ambition is to ensure that every resident, business, and visitor can easily access the services and support they need. This Customer Experience Strategy sets out how we will make our services more accessible, responsive, and inclusive so that everyone can engage with the council in ways that work best for them.

We recognise that our borough is diverse and dynamic, spanning both urban and rural communities with different needs and expectations. With a population of more than 159,000 people, we are proud of Swale's strong community spirit, natural beauty, and growing economy. However, we also face challenges, rising costs of living, increased demand for services, and the impacts of digital exclusion on some of our residents. These challenges require us to adapt how we work and to ensure that no one is left behind as we modernise our services.

Accessibility is at the heart of this strategy. We are committed to designing services that are easy to find, simple to use, and inclusive for all, whether accessed online, over the phone, or face to face. We want to make every customer interaction straightforward, fair, and consistent, while empowering residents to self-serve where possible and providing tailored support for those who need extra help.

This strategy builds on our Corporate Plan (2023–2027) and aligns with the council's strategic priorities across community, economy, environment, health and housing, and running the council efficiently. By improving accessibility and embracing technology responsibly, we aim to deliver high-quality services that reflect the values of integrity, fairness, and excellence.

We know that great customer service starts with listening. We will continue to learn from our residents, businesses, and partners to ensure our services remain relevant and responsive to changing needs. Together, we can create a council that is open, accessible, and connected, a council that truly works for everyone in Swale.

**Cllr Hannah Perkin**
Chair of Housing, Health and Community
(Lead for Customer Experience)

# National Context

Across England there are a wide range of local government services that are provided to local residents including; allotments, local planning, council housing, environmental health, markets and fairs, refuse collection and recycling, cemeteries and crematoria, leisure services, parks, education, social services, libraries and many more. As such, local government bodies need to ensure their customers are able to access the services they need. However, local government organisations face difficult challenges such as, delivering high-quality customer service to the general public while managing tight budgets and dated technology.

The Institute of Customer Service, produces an UK Customer Satisfaction Index (UKCSI) to provide an objective, independent perspective on the state of customer satisfaction in the UK across 13 sectors. In the July 2024 UKCSI, the results showed a further decline in average customer satisfaction in most sectors.

The overall fall in satisfaction in 2024 compared to the year before was relatively small, but across the UK economy, customer satisfaction is at its lowest level for several years.
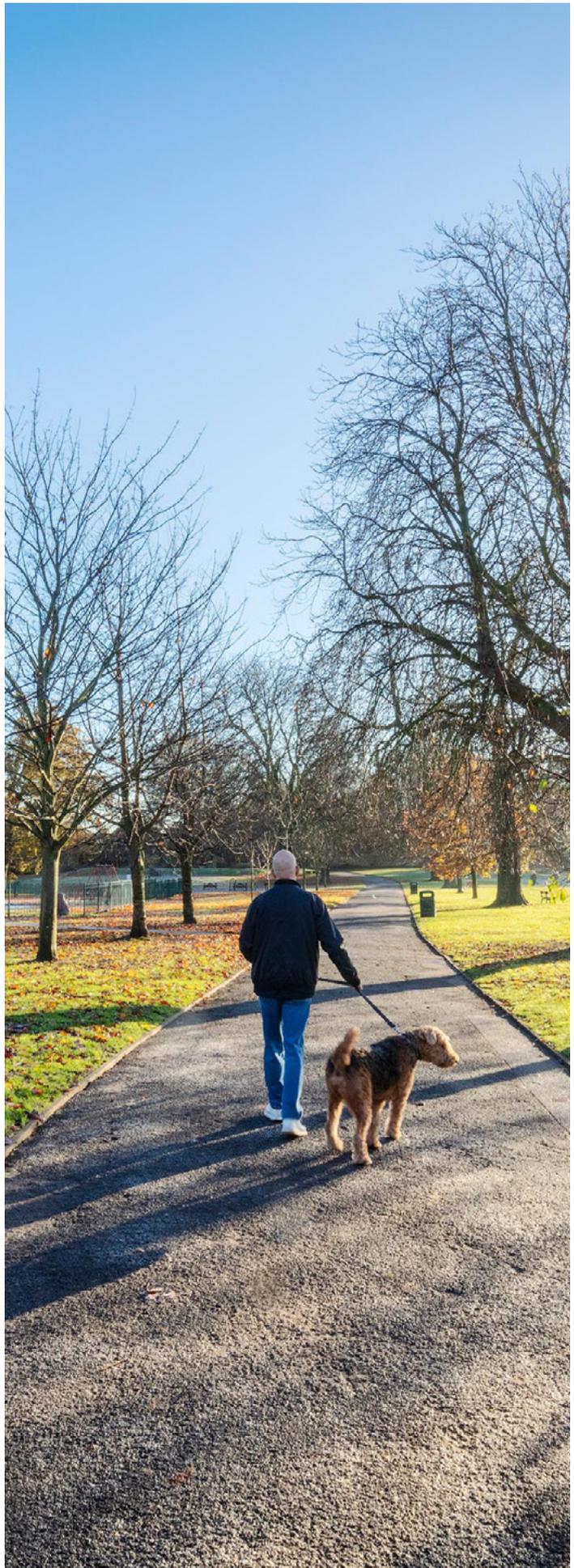
## Customer satisfaction by sector July 2023 – July 2024

| | July 24 | Jan 24 | July 2023 | Change from July 23 to July 24 | Change from Jan 24 to July 24 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Retail (Non-food) | 80.4 | 80.4 | 80.8 | -0.4 | 0.0 |
| Retail (Food) | 79.4 | 79.3 | 79.5 | -0.1 | 0.1 |
| Banks & Building Societies | 79.3 | 79.4 | 80.0 | -0.7 | -0.1 |
| Tourism | 79.3 | 79.6 | 80.4 | -1.1 | -0.3 |
| Leisure | 79.0 | 79.3 | 80.0 | -1.0 | -0.3 |
| Automotive | 78.5 | 79.0 | 79.4 | -0.9 | -0.5 |
| Insurance | 77.5 | 77.9 | 78.7 | -1.2 | -0.4 |
| Services | 73.5 | 73.4 | 74.4 | -0.9 | 0.1 |
| Public Services (National) | 73.3 | 73.6 | 74.3 | -1.0 | -0.3 |
| Telecommunications & Media | 73.3 | 74.7 | 75.4 | -2.1 | -1.4 |
| Transport | 71.5 | 71.7 | 71.9 | -0.4 | -0.2 |
| Public Services (Local) | 70.3 | 70.6 | 71.3 | -1.0 | -0.3 |
| Utilities | 69.8 | 69.5 | 69.5 | 0.3 | 0.3 |

▼ Fall of UKCSI score by between 1 and 1.4 points        ▼ Fall of UKCSI score by more than 2 points

*Figure 1: Customer satisfaction by sector July 2023 – July 2024*

The Public Services (Local) segment includes, GP surgeries / health centres, Libraries, Housing Associations, Ambulance Services, Local Council, Fire Service and Police Service.

Customers expectations are always increasing, where they expect faster, more personalised interactions, and connected experiences across digital channels. With advances in cloud, mobile, social, and artificial intelligence technology, customers want to be able to access services at a time of their choosing, on any device.

# Local Context

Swale is a north Kent district council spanning over 373.4 km$^2$ and encompasses a mix of urban and rural areas. Swale include towns such as Sittingbourne, Faversham, Queenborough and Sheerness. The borough is proud of its high-quality natural environment, which includes many protected areas of scientific significance and stunning natural beauty.

Swale has a growing population with more than 159,000 residents from different ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic levels, and with various disabilities.

The Council is projected to experience notable spending pressures in the upcoming years, further complicated by the uncertain nature of central government funding. The current Medium Term Financial Strategy points to a budget gap that needs to be addressed to balance the budget and handle the expected increase in future deficits. As the population grows, so does the demand for services also with higher expectations.

# Why We Need a Customer Experience Strategy

This Customer Experience Strategy sets out how we intend to ensure that our customers have the best possible experience, benefiting from accessible and high-quality services.

To shape the outcomes of this strategy, we sought the views of our residents, we listened to our business partners, the voluntary sector, staff and our members.

We went through an in-depth review of our former customer access strategy and found we need to change the way in which we engage with our customers. We want to focus on the best possible experiences for our customers. To improve the customer experience, we must change the culture, the technology we use and listen to our customers more.

The financial challenges that exist surrounding the council are likely to become even more severe due to rising inflation. The council as a result, faces higher costs, reduced funding and increasing demands. Therefore, we must meet the demands of our customers making best use of our available resources.
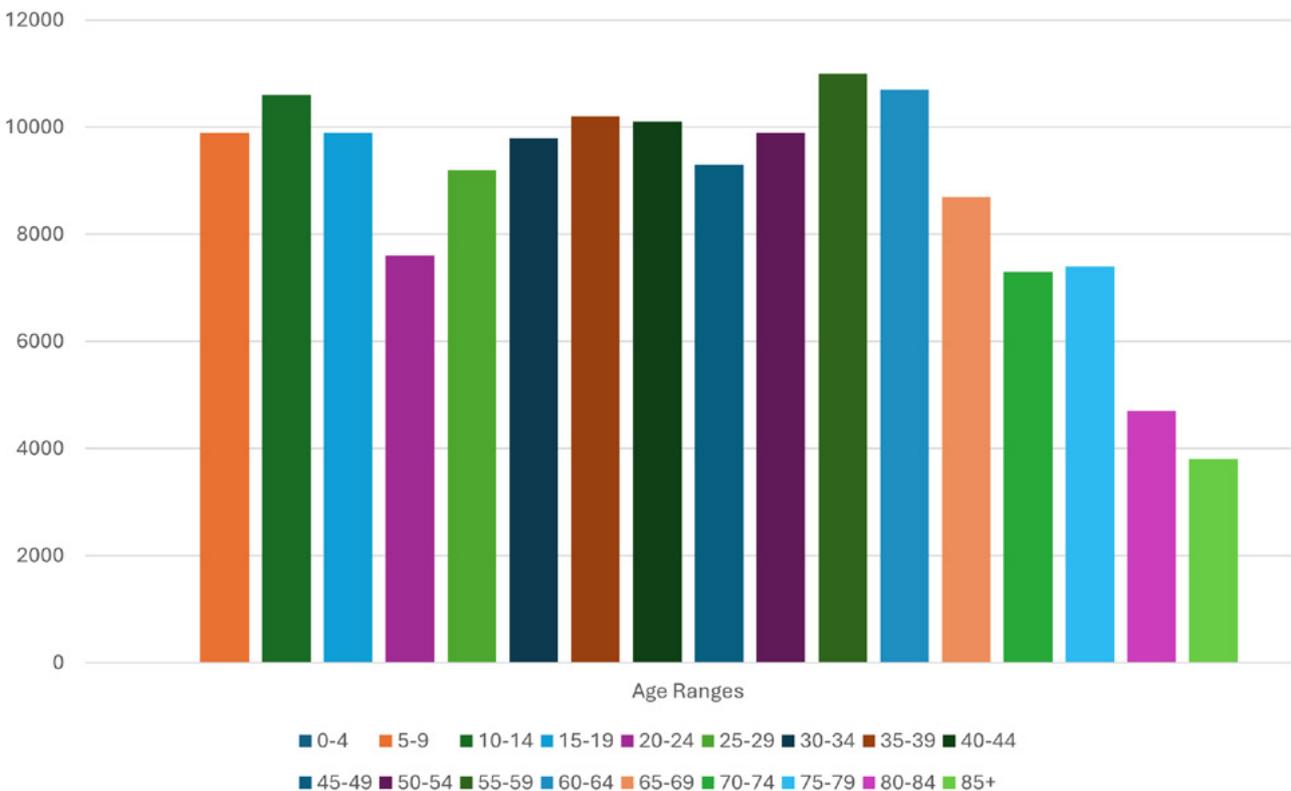
Although there are several challenges, we need to support our customers to self-help wherever possible and provide additional assistance to those who need it. This strategy outlines how this can be achieved.

# Swale's Customers

**Population***
**159,000**

**Males***
**78,500**

**Residents with a disability***
**18,561**

**Females***
**80,500**

# Swale Population



Legend: 0-4, 5-9, 10-14, 15-19, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-44, 45-49, 50-54, 55-59, 60-64, 65-69, 70-74, 75-79, 80-84, 85+

Age Ranges
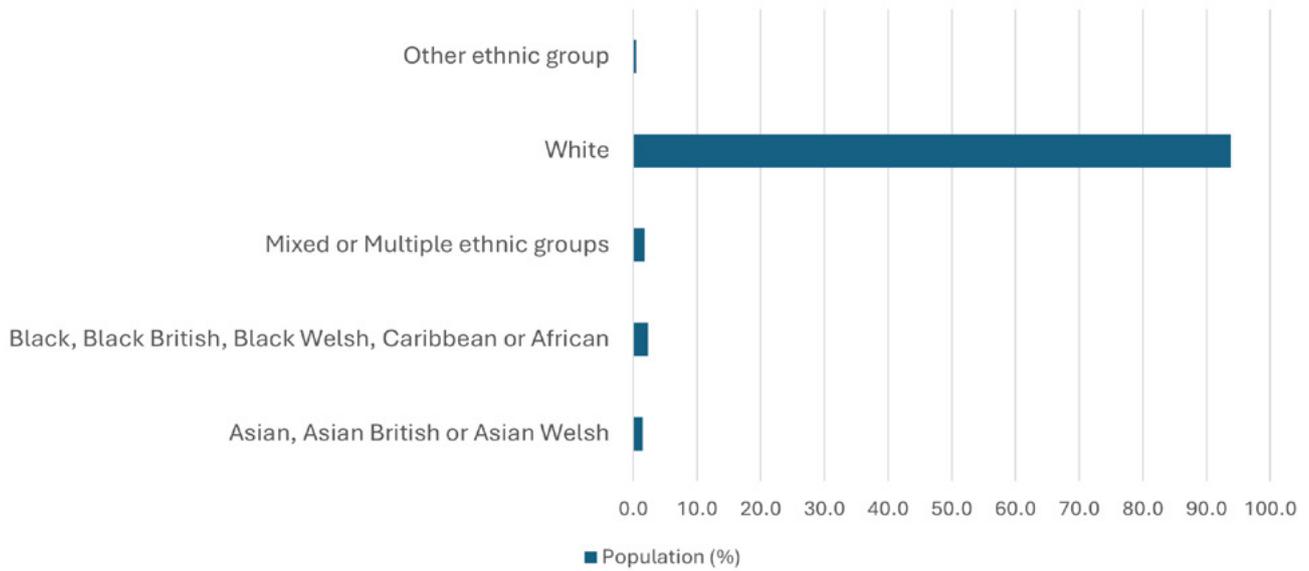
*Kent County Council interactive populations estimates toolkit
^ Source: DWP Presented by: Kent Analytics, Kent County Council

# Population (%)



Our customers are anyone who needs to or chooses to communicate with us. This includes residents, visitors, businesses, partners, suppliers, community groups, staff, neighbouring authorities and government bodies. Everyone who lives, works, studies, visits, or conducts business in Swale Borough Council will use a council service in one way or another.

# How Our Customers Engage With Us

**Face-to-face**
**15,220**

**Telephone**
**99,708**

**Self service**
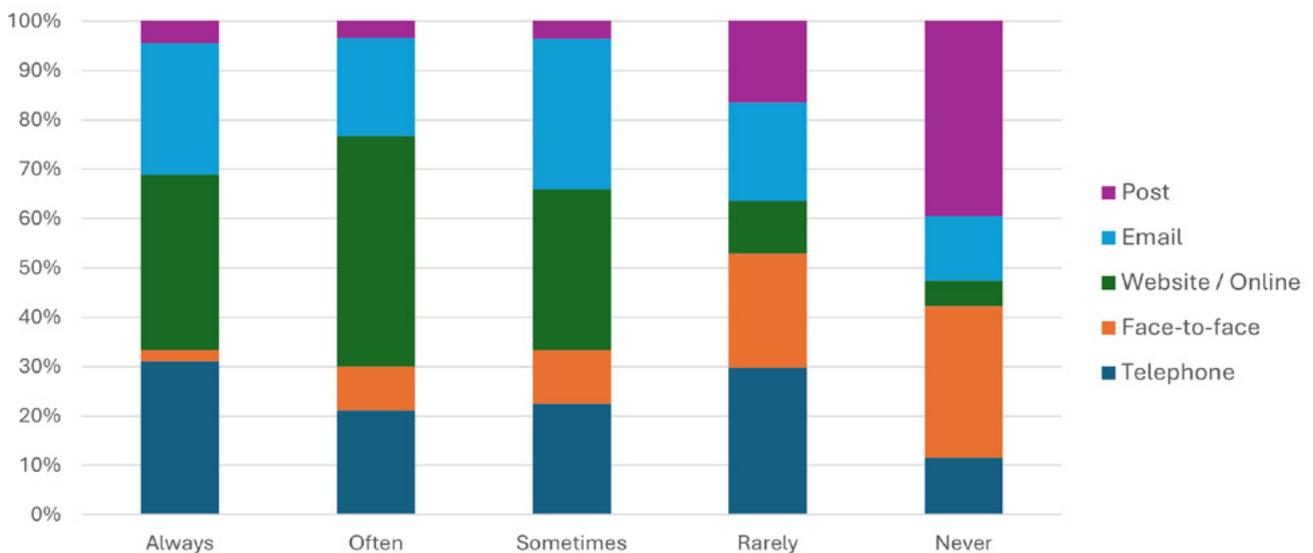**139,128**

**Email**
**13,484**

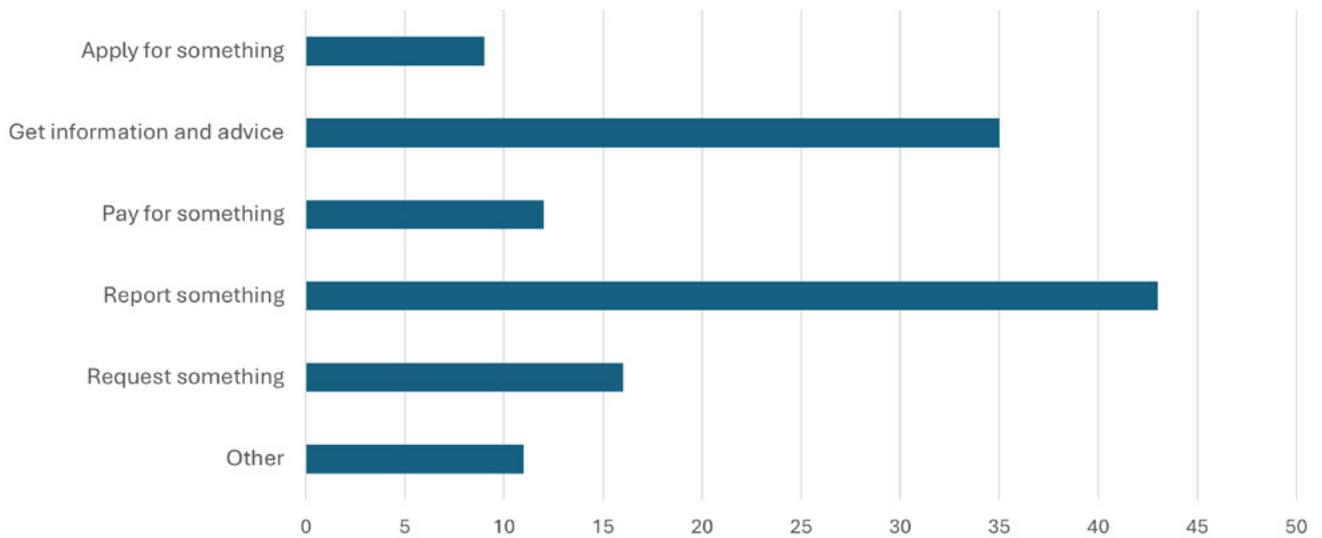Contact to Our Customer Contact Centre in 2024 Calendar Year

(this does not include contact directly to individuals or departments)

A recent survey of customers shows:

## How often do you use the following methods to contact us for information or assistance?



Legend:
- Post
- Email
- Website / Online
- Face-to-face
- Telephone

Categories: Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never

**Thinking about your most recent contact, what was the main reason why you were trying to make contact?**

| Reason | Value |
|---|---|
| Apply for something | 9 |
| Get information and advice | 35 |
| Pay for something | 12 |
| Report something | 43 |
| Request something | 16 |
| Other | 11 |

In recent years there has been a shift in contact volume across our phone, self-service, face-to-face and email channels. There has also been an increase in demand for council services. As our population and economy continues to grow, so will the volume of contact.

# What Our Customers Tell Us

"Just got back from a lovely walk along the Leas Minster. A very clean and lovely promenade. Plenty of bins for rubbish, plenty of facilities for the keep fit fanatics and all kept in a clean and good working order. Thank you for a lovely area "

"Faster response from teams in your service"

"Hi just a little note to say how lovely Iwade cemetery is looking. I visit mum twice a week and I must say the gardeners have done an amazing job over the last few weeks tiding up and planting bits. Even with the bad weather we have had of late it all looks beautiful. So many complain but rarely praise thank you for all their hard work."

"When you take a query get back to the person I've made 3 calls and 2 emails and been told people will get back to me and they don't."

"Thank you xxx for your support in helping me to find a new home & for your help during my time of crisis when homeless, you & your team at Swale council provide an amazing service to the community, without having to call on the need to be housed before I would never have imagined just how much dedication to provide these services is available. Thank you again to you and your team."

"Better website."

"I would like to compliment xxxx and say a huge thank you for all his help he has been absolutely fantastic and can't say thank you enough he has been there all the way with me he has listened and given me excellent advice and helped me through not so good times again many many thanks."

"Online chat would be amazing. Call back service would be great. Some kind of sms service where you can just text."

"I wanted to say thank you again for all of your help with our event, we greatly appreciate your encouraging attitude, your trust in us, and your generosity with the place and your time. On the day of the event, it became even more clear to us how important this park is to the community, and how much your work makes that possible. "
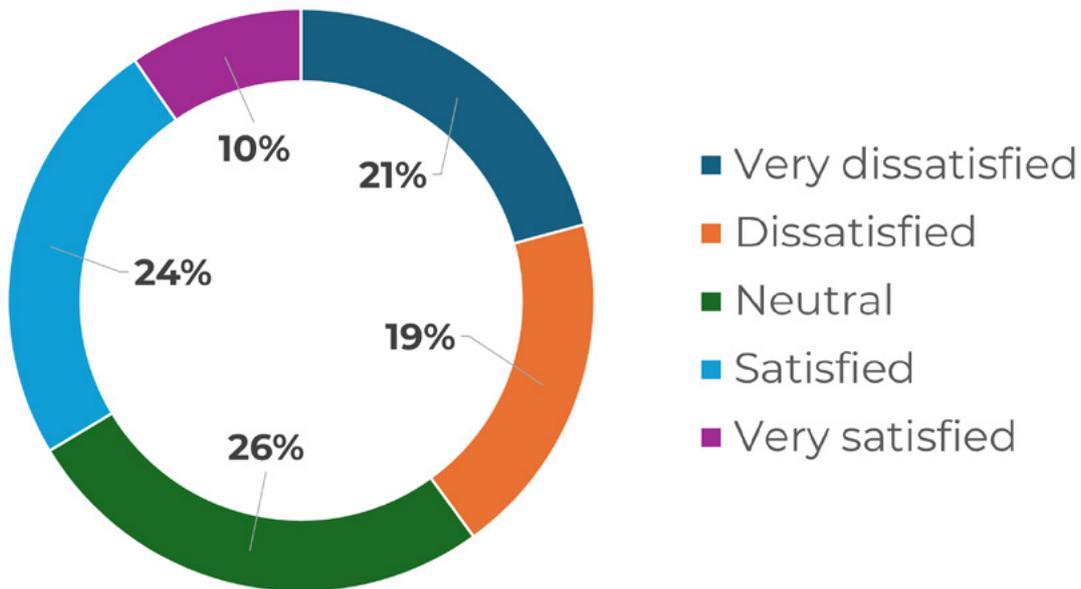
"Being able to communicate directly with whoever is responsible for a particular issue. "
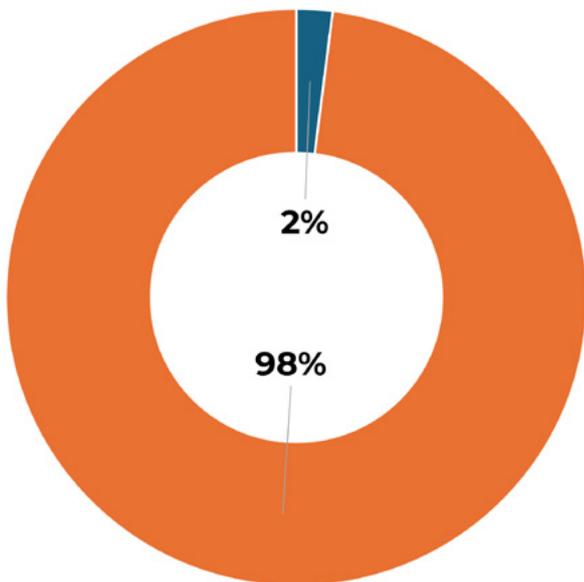
In a recent survey, our customers told us:

## How satisfied are you with the following methods?
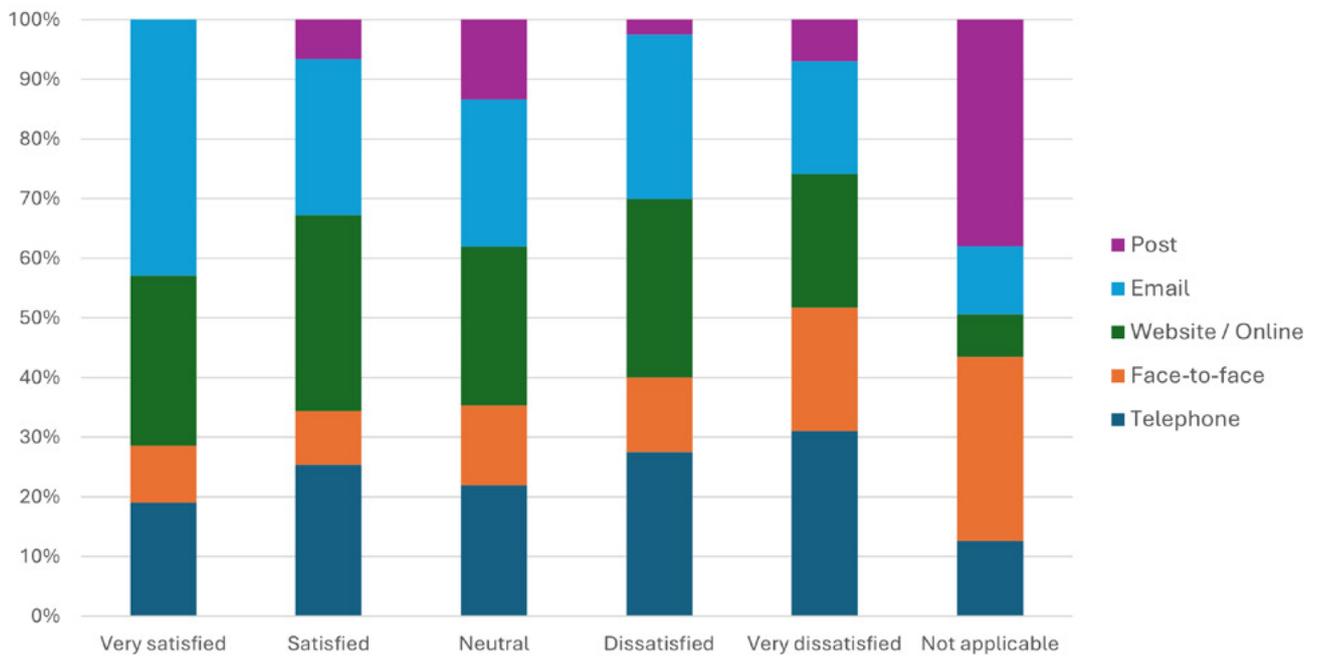
**Thinking about your most recent contact, overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the experience provided by Swale Borough Council?**

- 21% Very dissatisfied
- 19% Dissatisfied
- 26% Neutral
- 24% Satisfied
- 10% Very satisfied

Legend:
- Very dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Neutral
- Satisfied
- Very satisfied

**Do you have access to or are capable of the following?**

- 98% The internet, computer or mobile device
- 2% Not both
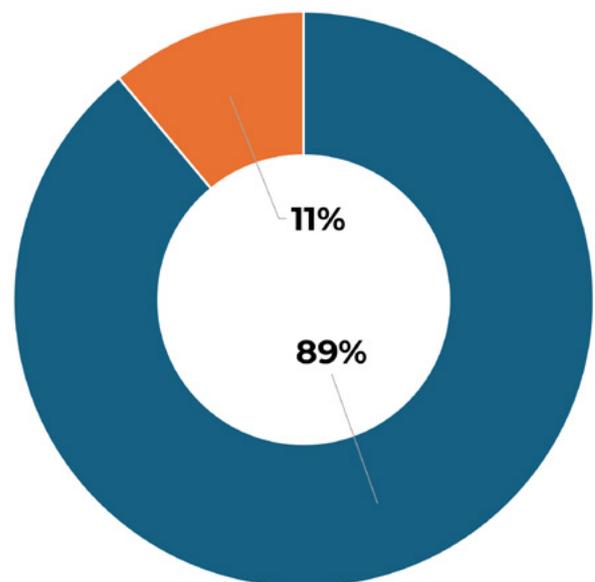
- 89% Using digital services confidently and using the self-service options on the Swale Borough Council website
- 11% Not both

👍 **92% of people who visited the Swale Borough Council website found it useful**

# Current Challenges and Opportunities for Change

## Cost of Living

The cost of living crisis has placed a significant financial strain on UK households, with many struggling to make ends meet. Rising prices for essentials such as food, energy, and fuel have led to increased monthly expenses, leaving less disposable income for other needs.

During this time of significant financial strain, we must provide additional support to those facing financial difficulties while ensuring we offer value for money to council taxpayers. Therefore, we are exploring various flexible and cost-effective methods to deliver services.

## Increased demand for services

Across the UK, councils are facing a greater demand for services without any increase in funding. In addition to this, customers expect to receive flexible and more personalised services which they can access 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Adapting to the needs of our customers requires managing the demand in a way that makes the best use of limited resources in order to improve the customer experience. A pragmatic approach is required, which allows customers to contact us using the most cost-effective ways where appropriate while allowing the council to focus on more complex cases where greater support is required.

## Digital exclusion

There are more digitally excluded populations in Swale compared to the Kent average. Factors that affect digital exclusion in Swale include, lack of access to the internet at home, access to equipment and the inability to effectively use, digital technology and online services. Customers who are digitally excluded are unable to appropriately access our self-service information and services online. Those who are more likely to be digitally excluded are mature and older people and those of working age on low incomes.

We need to find ways to help these customers by providing equipment, access and/or support to ensure everyone has the same access and consistent service when contacting us. Improve our customers' digital literacy to aid those who are isolated as well as improve employability skills.

## Deprivation

The Indices of Deprivation (IoD2019) are tools used to measure relative levels of deprivation in neighbourhoods or small areas. They rank areas based on income deprivation, employment deprivation, education, skills and training deprivation, health deprivation and disability, crime, barriers to housing and services and living environment deprivation. Swale has the second highest amount of deprived neighbourhoods or small areas in Kent.

As outlined in the Empowering You in Swale Strategy, we are committed to improve the lives of residents in the borough and tackle inequalities. As such, we are taking a community development approach, bringing people together to take collective action and work on solutions to reduce inequalities and support Swales communities to thrive and be more sustainable for the future.

## Equality of Access

All individuals, regardless of their background or identity, should have the same opportunities to participate in all aspects of society, including education, employment, and public services.

The diversity of our communities requires us to proactively adjust in order to ensure everyone can contribute to and benefit from the public sector. This means understanding the barriers individuals may experience when trying to access services.

## Understanding Customer Expectations

Our customers' voices are important to our operations. By understanding our customer experiences, we can better understand their needs, preferences, and expectations. In public services, customer expectations are generally centred around efficient, reliable, and accessible service delivery, with a strong emphasis on fairness, transparency, and responsiveness.

We want our customers to expect to be treated with respect and dignity, and to feel that their needs and concerns are being addressed effectively.  We need to be able to capture customer comments and feedback through a variety of channels. With insights data we can make the best use of the information about customer contact in a timely way, by tailoring our services effectively to meet our customers' requirements.

**Operational Data and Technology**

By the nature of the services provided by local authorities, there is a vast array of systems needed to function operational. Additionally, the customers who contact us must have confidence that our systems are well maintained, that their data is secure and without the need to repeat information to multiple Officers and/or systems.

Local authorities generate huge quantities of data across a variety of back-office systems. Data held in silos in back-office systems that do not speak to each other ensures security, often at the detriment of customer experience. Furthermore, further inefficiencies are created when officers are unable to effectively serve our customers because of the technology available to them is outdated or restricting.

Making a conscious decision to ensure our customers experience the best possible services requires that we improve our systems, processes and subsequently understand the information available to us.

For instance, by determining the unique requirements and preferences of our community, it enables us to provide services that are more effective and focused on areas where they can make the most difference. We can also reduce officer time in front-office and back-office procedures by utilising data. In addition, we can increase productivity and free up employees to work on more difficult and valuable jobs by automating repetitive chores and simplifying operations.
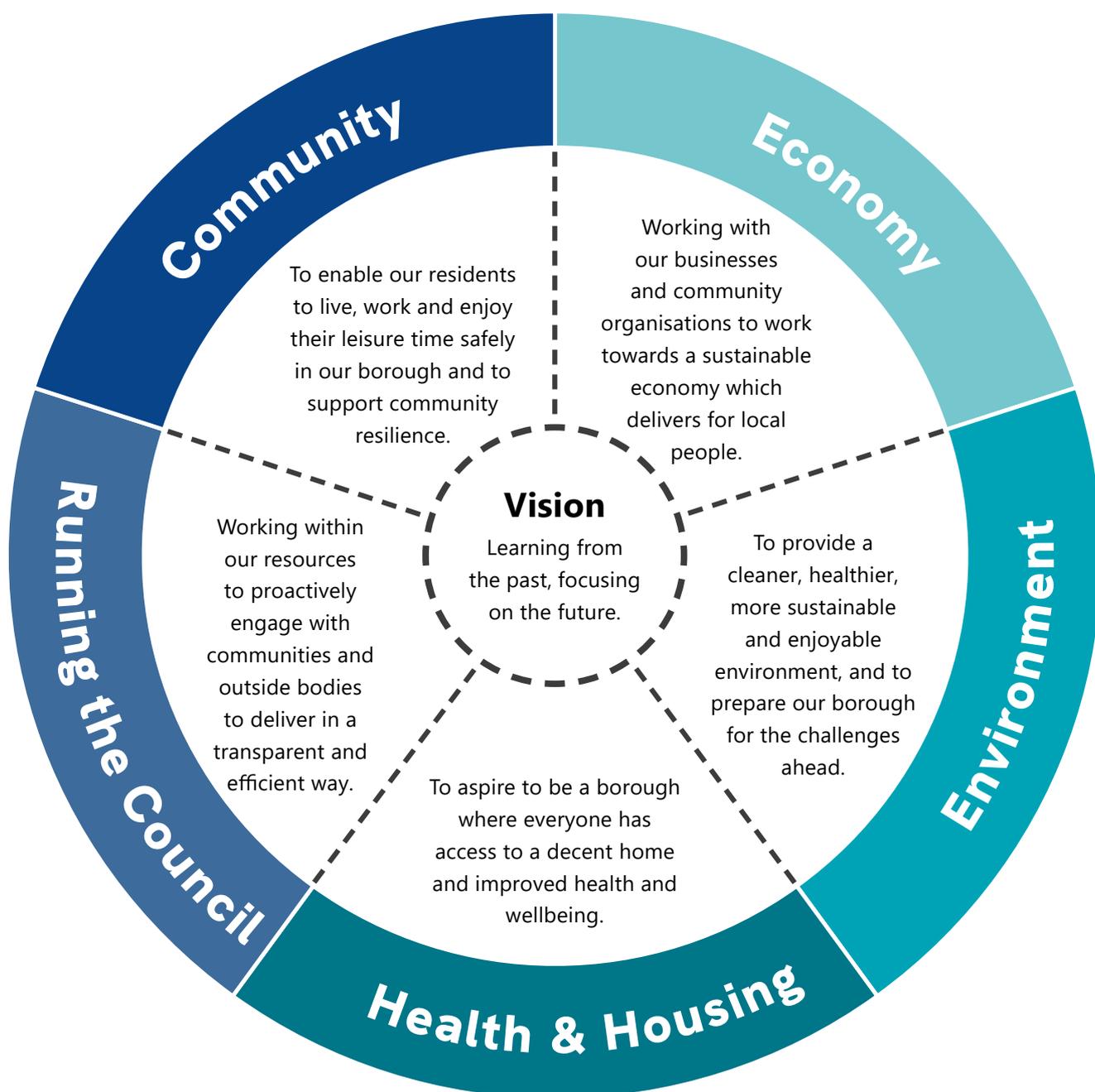
# Strategic Priorities

Swale – Learning from the past, focusing on the future
Council - Corporate Plan (swale.gov.uk)

The Corporate Plan sets out the council's ambitions and priorities up to 2027. The customer experience strategy links in with the overarching priorities of the Corporate Plan to ensure that we are delivering the best for our communities and consistently linking service delivery to overall priorities.

*Figure 2: Swale Borough Council's corporate plan 2023-2027*



Community
To enable our residents to live, work and enjoy their leisure time safely in our borough and to support community resilience.

Economy
Working with our businesses and community organisations to work towards a sustainable economy which delivers for local people.

Running the Council
Working within our resources to proactively engage with communities and outside bodies to deliver in a transparent and efficient way.

Vision
Learning from the past, focusing on the future.

Environment
To provide a cleaner, healthier, more sustainable and enjoyable environment, and to prepare our borough for the challenges ahead.

Health & Housing
To aspire to be a borough where everyone has access to a decent home and improved health and wellbeing.

# Our Vision

We are committed to ensuring all our customers who interact with us will have a positive experience at each stage of the journey, irrespective of their channel of choice when they contact us.

We will ensure our culture is customer centric and that our people, systems and processes facilitate the best experience possible. This means developing and inspiring confidence in our digital services and working collaboratively internally, with other agencies and in partnership with our voluntary and community services to make sure our services are accessible to all.

Our consumers who can self-serve will be encouraged to do so, since information and services will be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, using a more innovative service delivery method to fulfil expectations. While our more vulnerable customers who are less confident in using self-serve, do not have access to technology, will still be able to contact us using other channels.

# Customer Experience Promise

We want all our customers to have clear expectations of what they can expect of us. There are significant financial constraints to deliver value for money and the need to be flexible in our approach as technology, legislation and our demographics change.

Our five key customer experience promises have been developed following engagement with our customers and are designed to help us deliver our vision.

*We are committed to ensuring all our customers who interact with us will have a positive experience at each stage of the journey, irrespective of their channel of choice when they contact us.*

**Simplicity**

**High Standards**

**Listen & Learn**

**Support for Vulnerable**

**Accountability & Respect**

## 1) Simplicity

Our customers are assured that they know what to expect from our services and by making our self-service customer experience so good from beginning to end that our customers prefer to use them.

## 2) Listen & learn

Be proactive and work together across departments to resolve issues and improve services. Welcome feedback from our customers, offer opportunities to provide feedback and keep track of our performance, to improve how we do things.

## 3) Accountability & Respect

Being open and honest with our customers about what we can and cannot do and responsibly deliver services in a way which provides value for money. Also being transparent about our process and ensure no customers are discriminated against.

## 4) High Standards

To create a culture focused around the customer experience. Ensure staff are trained to be caring and emphatic in our interactions. Provide clear and easy to understand information that is up to date and promote the advantages of self service.

## 5) Support for vulnerable

Recognise specific requirements our customers may have and address any barriers to accessing information and services.

# How We Will Achieve This

To support our customer experience promise we will deliver an action plan. Our outlined action plan has been developed under three outcomes and objectives. These outcomes are all interlinked although presented separately.

## Streamline Interactions

**Objective:**

Make interactions straightforward and user-friendly.

**Actions:**

- Ensure customers are informed of what to expect at every stage through communication that is clear, up to date, accurate and timely.

- Continuing to increase the range of services available through self-service, giving our customers the option to choose the most convenient for them 24/7.

- Make our channels easy to use and understand by making use of the best possible technology. Also to explore alternative technologies such as chat and further automation.

- Transform our customer service model with the customer in mind to reduce demand and focus on resolving issues at first point of contact to meet expectations.

# Gather Insights and Adapt

**Objective:**

Understand and respond to customer feedback.

**Actions:**

- Introduce an approach to gather and track customer feedback consistently.

- Regularly review performance metrics and customer satisfaction levels.

- Routinely use data to identify trends, so we can improve processes and make them more suitable for our customers.

- Ensure customers are involved in the development of and redesign of our services.

# Uphold Integrity and Excellence

**Objective:**

Ensure fairness, respect, and high-quality service while supporting those in need.

**Actions:**

- A council wide commitment to deliver the Customer Experience Promise and a consistent customer experience across all departments where we encourage a culture of responsibility and taking ownership.

- Ensure services are easily accessible, inclusive and address diverse equality needs.

- All staff have the knowledge and skills (including digital skills) to deliver an excellent customer experience through continuous training and quality assurance.

- To provide targeted support and resources to the digitally excluded and most vulnerable members of the community to make sure that all customers can access our self- service channels. Also by working alongside other public sector organisations and community groups to provide digital assistance to support people who find it difficult to get online.

- Transform the work of our customer

facing and back-office teams, reducing their administrative tasks and focusing them on providing more customer centric services. This will allow staff to focus on complex enquiries through other channels where self-service may not be appropriate.

# How We Will Know We Are Getting Things Right

This customer experience strategy sets out how we intend to ensure that our customers have the best possible experience, benefiting from accessible and high-quality services.

To ensure that our priorities remain current, relevant and valid we will regularly review and refresh this document. We will also listen and learn from our residents, businesses and partners to keep improving our services.

To measure the success of this customer experience strategy, we developed operational measures of success to monitor, manage and improve customer interactions and satisfaction levels. These operational measures determine the success of the work that we are undertaking as part of the customer experience strategy.

**Our Customers Will**

- Give more positive feedback about their experiences interactions with us

- Have their requests dealt with reliably, where service standards are being met

- Use self-service more confidently through its reliability and ease of use

**Our staff will**

- Tell us in our staff survey that they feel supported to do their job

- Have fewer manual workarounds due to simpler processes

- Be able to help customers more quickly, without customers being misdirected

**The Data Will Show**

- Increase the number of customer requests within agreed timescales

- Increase the number of complaint responses responded within agreed timescales

- Reduced cost per interaction, through increased use of self service.

**Alternative formats**

If you require this document in an alternative format, e.g. easy read, large text, audio, Braille, or a community language, please get in touch.