



Customer First Programme

# Annual Report 2023

# Introduction

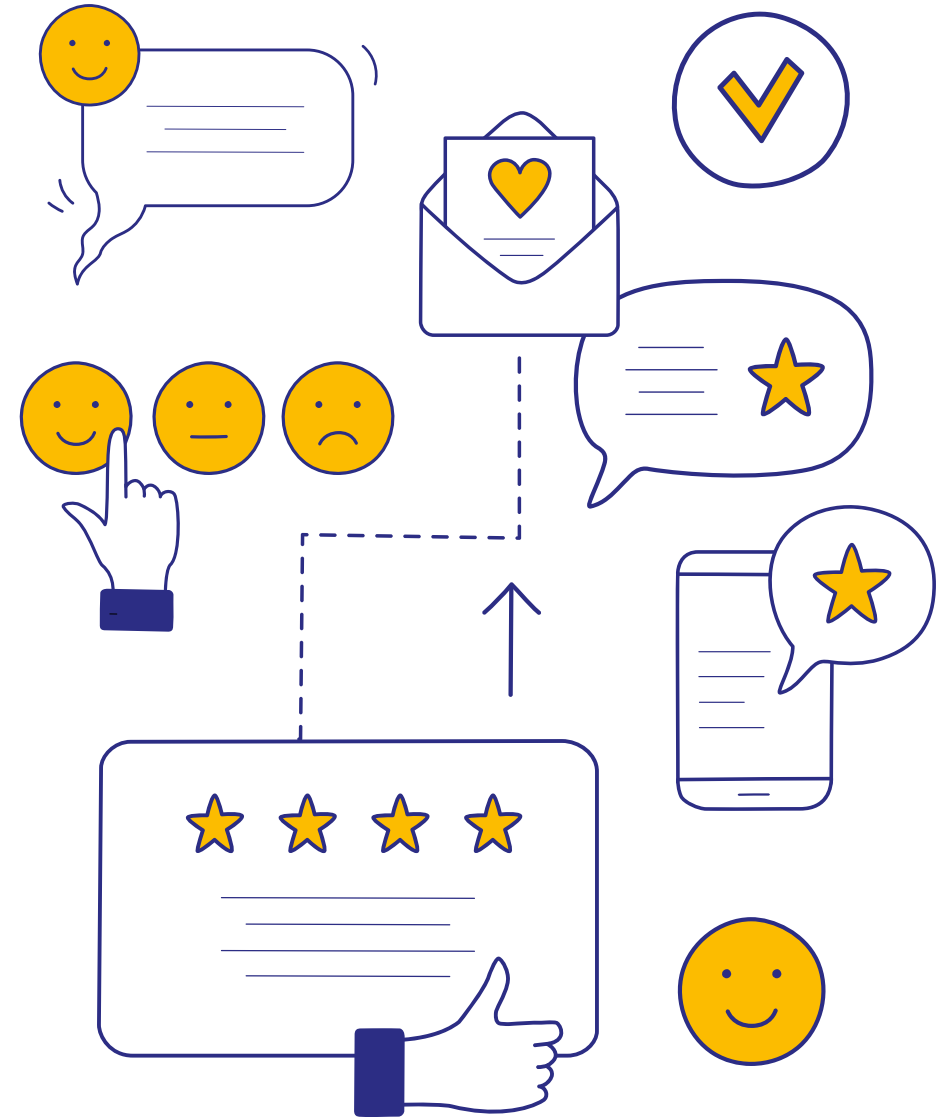
## The vision:

**A Customer First culture is prioritised throughout the entire organisation and every employee values, owns and exemplifies this.**

A great customer experience from first contact with the Council through to the delivery of service is a corporate priority. However, to deliver this we know that it needs to be more than words. This report sets out our progress over the last year against our ambition to be a 'Customer First' organisation.

We are here to make people's lives better. That includes delivering the kind of customer service that we'd want for ourselves and our families and friends.

We know that behaviours matter. Even when things have gone wrong, providing the customer with a great experience can rebuild their trust and confidence in us.



# Our customer service goals

## Easy

### We make it easy for customers to get in touch with us.

To achieve this, we:

- Provide a number of ways to get in touch - in person, on the telephone or online.
- Join communications up, both inside the council and with our local partners.
- Help where tailored assistance is needed - for example where a customer has a disability or health condition.

## Helpful

### We get things right for customers first time.

To achieve this, we:

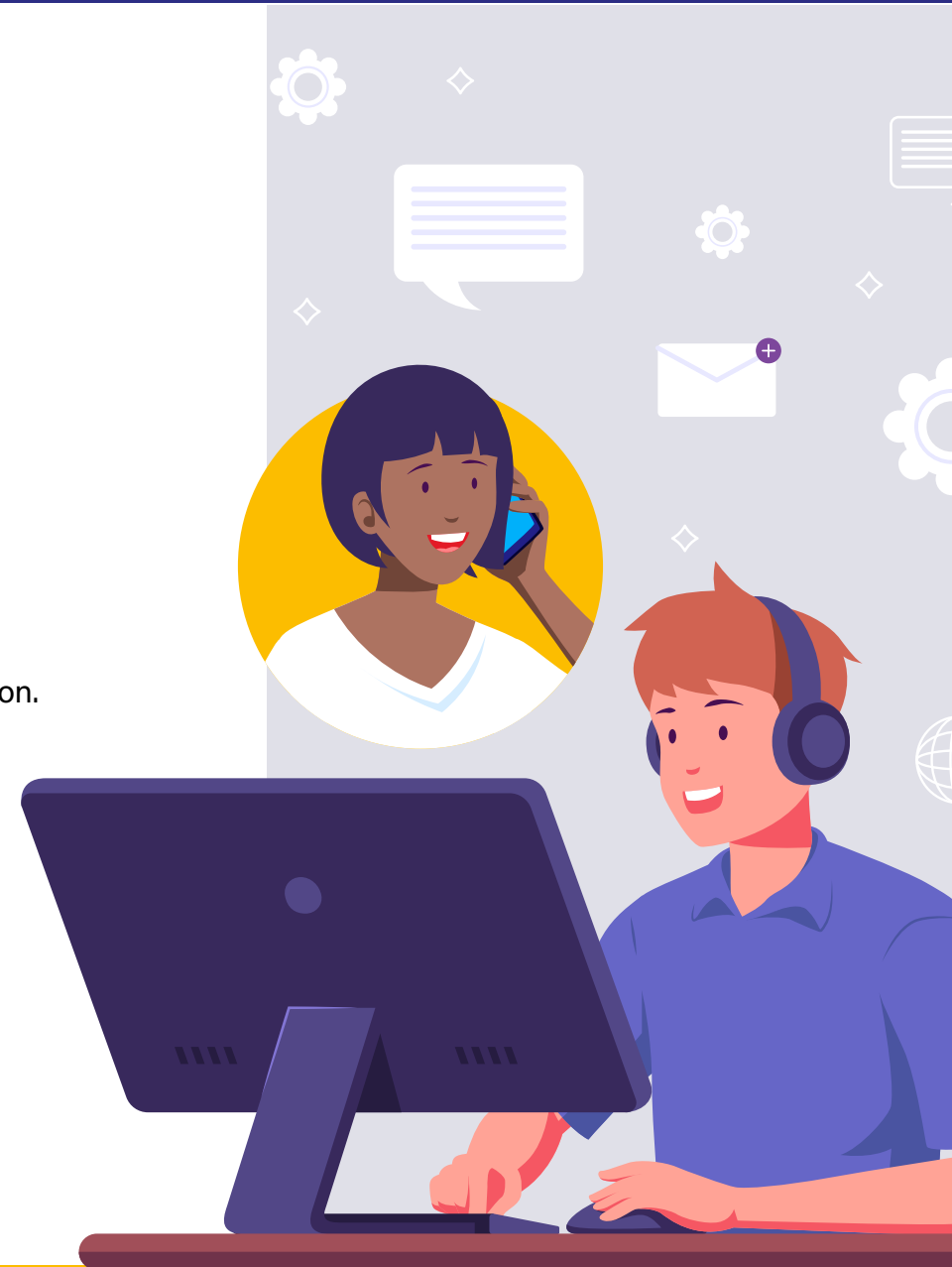
- Ensure customers feel confident that we've listened, understood and will take action.
- Always look for ways to improve how we do things.
- Deal with things quickly and tell customers when there is a delay.

## Fair and honest

### We are clear about what we can and can't offer, and the reasons why.

To achieve this, we:

- Treat customers with courtesy.
- Say sorry if we get something wrong and learn from our mistakes.
- Clearly explain our actions, so that customers understand our decisions.
- Keep customer information and data secure in compliance with GDPR.



# Improving how customers contact us

Buckinghamshire is home to a diverse population of 550,000 residents, each with unique needs and preferences in terms of communication. To ensure we address these needs effectively, our goal is to design customer journeys that cater to different groups:

- For digitally proficient individuals, we aim to create processes that intuitively guide them to the most suitable channel of contact.
- For those who are nervous or uncertain about digital platforms, we strive to provide a telephone service that assists them to become proficient with our digital offerings.
- For residents who are unable to use our digital tools, our future focus is on telephone calls or arranging bookable meetings to offer expert guidance at our Library Council Access Points and Council Access Point+ sites at our Council offices, or through online meetings.

Buckinghamshire Council launched the Year of Conversation in 2023 to encourage and advocate the importance of a good conversation to enhance relationships, get faster outcomes and improve resolutions. In a hybrid world, technology is a key tool for us, but there will always be a place for conversation. This is seen throughout the work that Customer First promotes, in improving face to face and telephony services for customers, providing training for staff on handling difficult conversations and encouraging the continued collaboration of service areas across the council.



# Customers we helped 2022-2023



Since July 2023

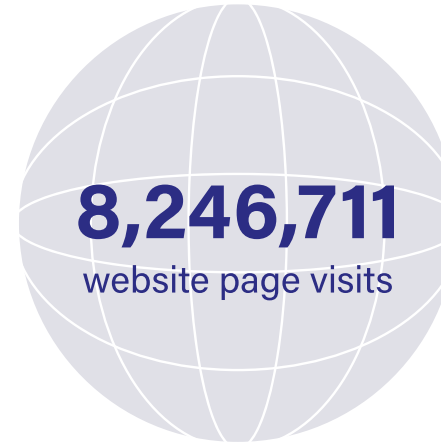
**14,651**

webchats have taken place directly with our Customer Services Advisors.



Since July 2023, our ChatBot has assisted customers

**31,835**  
times



**8,246,711**  
website page visits

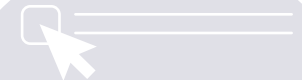
**23,420**  
visits to CAP+ and Library CAPs  
(Council Access Points)

**375,255**

incoming calls handled

**76.8%**

of queries were resolved on the customer's first call



**21,349**

online contact forms processed by Customer Services in 2023



# How we continue to embed Customer First values

## Educating new members of staff

We will ensure that:

- New members of staff complete the mandatory Customer First training as part of their induction.
- Customer focus is demonstrated in job descriptions.
- Call shadowing is offered in our Customer Service Centres to understand the breadth of customer enquiries and our services better.

## Training and mentoring existing staff

Existing staff will be provided with:

- Ongoing training and development options focused on providing a high quality customer experience.
- Access to and the opportunity to become a Customer First Champion for their service area to act as an advocate and encourage enhanced customer focus.
- Call shadowing opportunities.
- Access to performance and insight data monitoring reports and tools.

## Communicating with customers

We use plain English for communicating with our customers and aim to:

- Provide easy, simple ways to contact us online, through the telephone or in person.
- Provide the same great experience whichever channel they choose.
- Keep customers updated on their service request.
- Let customers know how long it will take to complete their request.
- Invite any Buckinghamshire resident over 18 to join our Customer Partnership Panel to get involved in service improvements and have the opportunity to input their opinions.
- Provide the opportunity to give feedback after receiving a service from us.
- Offer a voice and document translation service for customers who require it.



# Customer First improvements

## Handling complex and difficult conversations

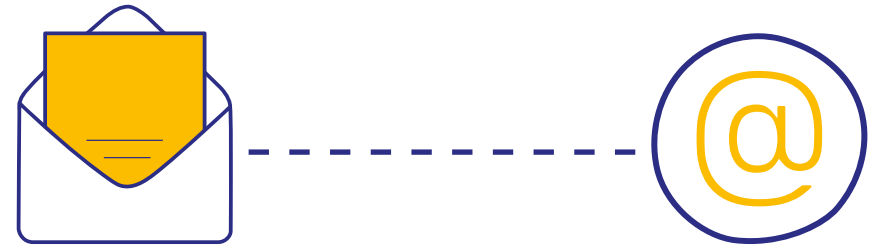
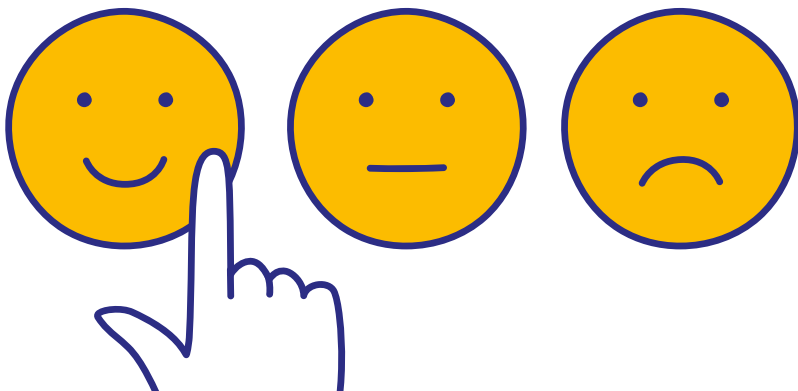
We've enhanced our customer service training offering to include a course aimed at equipping people with the knowledge and tools to deal with complex or difficult conversations in a calm and supported way. It gives people the chance to look at how they personally deal with conflict, and how they can understand the impact being in this type of situation has on them and the customer.

## Customer Partnership Panel

Customers views are vital to shaping the council's vision for the future. Our Customer Partnership Panel is an opportunity for residents, to give us advice on:

- Our website.
- Our forms.
- The other ways we communicate, such as letters, emails or updates.

We will listen to feedback and look for ways to improve further. Anyone who is over 18 and resident in Buckinghamshire is welcome to join. Visit our [website](#) for more information.



## Digital Postroom project support

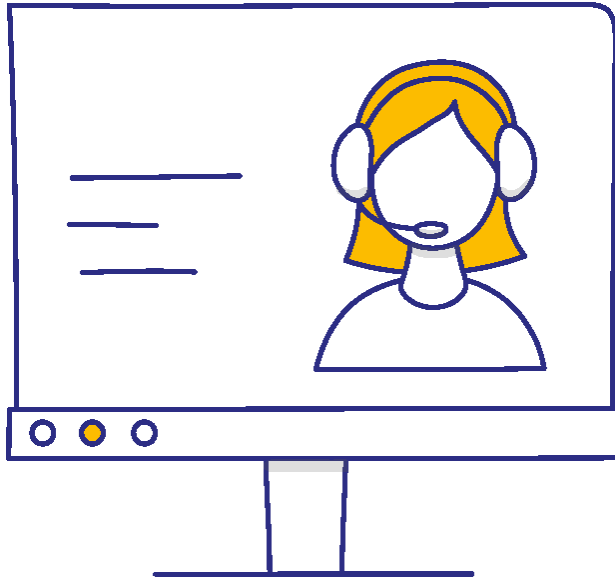
We want our hard copy correspondence to be managed as efficiently as possible. Our Digital Post Room was launched recently, with the first phase being the Digital Incoming Mail process. Scanning tens of thousands of pieces of post, delivered to colleagues digitally, meaning letters reach staff quickly to be processed and actioned.

The second phase of the project, the Digital Outbound Print and Post process, is currently going live. This allows colleagues to print and post a letter from any location where they are working. They can also customise the letter or even add a physical stock item such as a leaflet or pre-paid envelope to the letter before it is posted, providing a streamlined customer experience.

## Document translation service

Document translation is a vital service for our customers whose first language may not be English.

We're trialling a service, developed by another UK council and Amazon Web Services, that provides this translation in less than 10 minutes at a fraction of the cost by using open-source technology and machine translation.



## How residents contact the Council online

Our online contact form has been completely rebuilt in 2023 to help our customers to find what they need the first time they come to our website.

Sometimes, people may be overwhelmed by the website content and use the contact form instead. This means they ask a question when the answer could only be a few clicks away. The newly built form means the customer is now walked through our processes and are prompted to use our full suite of digital tools and guidance.

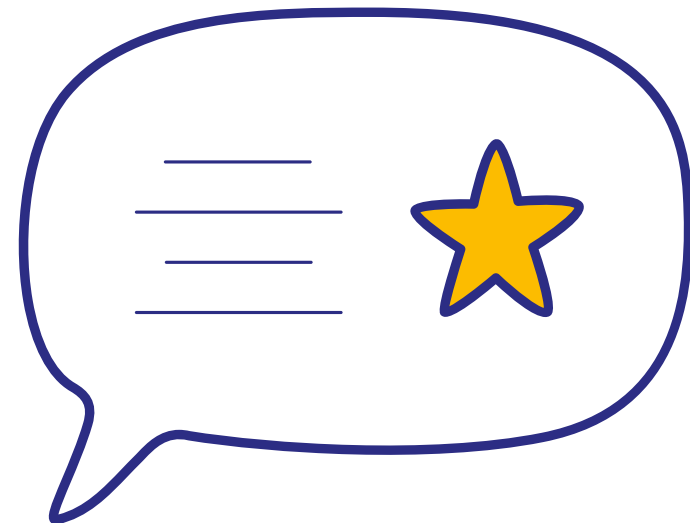
Throughout the process we promote webchat, utilising our virtual assistant feature. We nudge them in the direction of interactive web forms, encouraging them to self-serve. We channel the customer through this triage first, putting the answer at their fingertips and keeping them on their digital journey.

## Feedback directly from customers

How do you measure success? Or where we need to make improvements? It is important to listen to the views of our residents so we can find out what they like, and where things could be better. The best way to do this is through simple, instant feedback, to help gain a view of how people feel.

We do this through our Happy or Not feedback surveys. At the end of some of our service requests, the customer is invited give feedback digitally. This could be a smiling face, or an angry face, depending on their opinion. They are also encouraged to write a few words of text if they feel strongly about something.

This real-time data helps us to see hour by hour how residents feel. It helps us to identify 'pain points', where the customer experience needs improving. We intend to increase the use of these into 2024, to get a better understanding of customer opinion.





## Improving telephony across the organisation

We're in the process of implementing a new web-based telephone platform, designed to connect our customers with the professional help they need, across all service areas that talk directly to customers.

The platform enables better functionality such as call recording, better reporting to look at performance and training opportunities as well as gives the customers clearer expectations on call wait times, gives a call back function, and allows them to give feedback after the call.

## Maturity Assessments and Account Management

At Buckinghamshire Council, we recognise the power of conversation. It is important we keep a dialogue open between our service areas and the customer services team. We need to evaluate the effectiveness of the Customer First programme, and to further support service areas and teams to achieve their customer objectives.

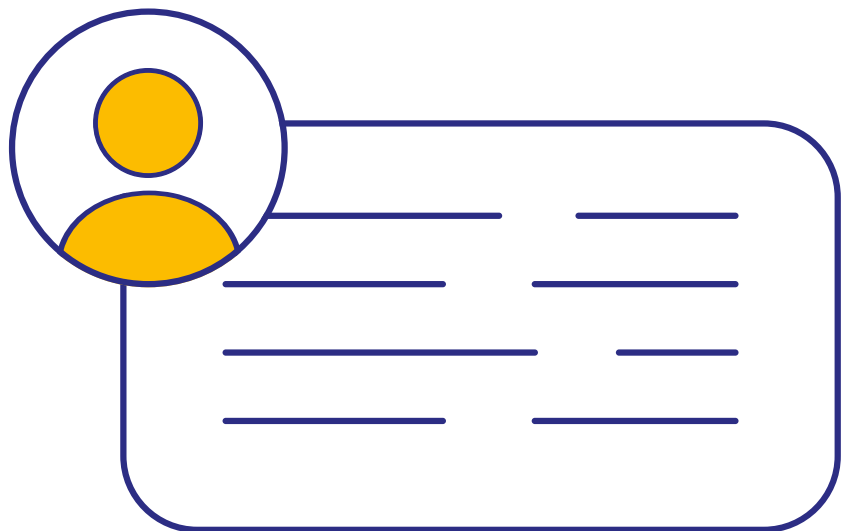
In 2023, we introduced Customer Maturity Reports. These work both ways; helping the Customer First team measure the extent to which the aims of the programme have been explained to services, and helping to establish where services may need extra support. We look at all aspects of customer delivery, suggest improvements, and celebrate success.

This is monitored throughout the year with regular account management sessions between service areas and customer services, to strengthen the bond of continuous improvement, to keep alive those conversations.



## Improvements in Fix My Street

Fix My Street is a map based website/app that allows customers to report issues that might happen on the roads, such as a pothole, broken street light, trees and fly-tipping. This system ensures the customer can accurately locate the place where the issue is occurring and allows the Council to direct the enquiry to the right place automatically, even if it's another organisation who has responsibility for the issue. 66,120 reports using Fix My Street in 2023, meaning customers raise their issue directly onto Fix My Street, and customers are kept updated with their report automatically, reducing ongoing repeated contact into the Council. During 2023, improvements in digital processes on Fix My Street saved the council £55,335 in staff processing time.



## Webchat/Bot improvements

Recognising the increasing demand for instant assistance and round-the-clock availability, we have invested in the development of a chatbot service. This virtual assistant providing prompt and accurate responses to the most common customer queries, improving response times and overall satisfaction.

## Notifications to customers

We help services keep residents informed and updated. We promote the use of 'push notifications', where an email or SMS text message is sent keeping the customer up to date. This has been used in Home to School Transport, Household waste services, and many other areas. We plan to use it more over 2024, particularly with our new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system that will be shared across all parts of the Council.

## Using data to make improvements

We use data to help our teams work out what matters. It may be something small, like helping Environmental Health work out which type of household pest is reported the most. Or something major, like monitoring all telephone lines. All of this helps improve our understanding of our customers and how best to support them.

## Making improvements across the Council

Having all these tools in place to help find areas for improvement using data, make process developments and implement new systems means we are in a great position to help other services that need some support in making things better for their customers. For example, have worked with the Home to School Transport team to bring in a new payment and telephony system, as well as other process improvements, to improve the way customers can communicate with the team, the team can communicate with customers and bring their payments system inline with customer expectations.



# Future developments

## Chatbot/future AI

AI is transforming the way we interact with our customers and deliver our services. We have already successfully deployed a chatbot that handles over 2000 queries per week, providing quick and accurate answers to common questions and requests. We are actively looking at ways to expand the use of AI on our website and phone services to support customers across a wider range of services. For example, we're planning to trial telephony AI to assist customers who call us, by finding information, directing them to the correct team, or helping them complete an action. This frees up our customer service agents to focus on supporting vulnerable customers, those with more complex enquiries and those who prefer not to use digital services.

But we are not stopping there. We are also exploring how AI can assist our customer service agents, by capturing and summarising customer conversations automatically. This will help them to quickly and easily update our various systems, reducing errors and saving time. By using AI to enhance our customer service, we aim to improve customer satisfaction, efficiency and quality. But please be assured that any decisions will always be taken by a human – not AI.



## Bookable face to face appointments for vulnerable customers or complex conversation

During a recent consultation with our Customer Partnership Panel, 53% of respondents expressed a positive interest in the concept of bookable appointments. They indicated a desire to connect with a professional officer for more complex service requests.

Our next phase will look at how this will work in practise and what services we can provide in the appointments.

## Customer Relationship Management

One of our major projects for 2024 is the use of our Customer Relationship Management tools. This is the software we use for our interactive web forms, and to capture information so our customer services team have everything they need to help our residents.

We have already begun this programme of work, and in 2024 we intend to normalise the use of this platform across the whole council. This will give a common customer journey for all service lines. We aim to provide accessible content, designed to give the best possible experience, in line with our customer contact strategy.