

# Customer Service Strategy 2015 - 2018



Our customer service commitment:

**We are committed to working in partnership with our customers to deliver an excellent service experience.**



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## References

Council Plan 2013-2017 (Surf Coast Shire)  
Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey 2014 (DTPLI)  
Health and Wellbeing Plan 2013-2017 (Surf Coast Shire)  
Customer Service Charter 2013 (Surf Coast Shire)  
Information Services Strategy 2013 – 2016 (Surf Coast Shire)  
Planning and Development Customer Focus Review 2014-15

## Review of other materials

Navigate The Future of Customer Service, Forrester, 2012  
Investigating (sic) commitment and performance at the business unit level, Winkler, Konig and Kleinmann, 2012  
Trends in employee engagement, AON Hewitt, 2013  
The Future of Customer Service: From Personal, to Self, to Crowd Service, Van Belleghem, 2013  
Australia's Fifth Quadrant Customer Experience, Strategy and Research Organisation, 2013  
Linking People Measures to Strategy, Gates, 2003  
Getting engaged, Gates, 2004  
Customer Service Charter, City of Yarra, 2008  
Customer Service Guarantee, City Monash, 2013  
Customer Focus Strategy, Bayside City Council, 2013-2017

# Introduction

## About this strategy

Surf Coast Shire Council is committed to providing customers with excellent and consistent customer service. Council is firm in the belief that customer service is everyone's responsibility.

Our Customer Service Charter, adopted in 2013 and included in the "Our promise" section on page seven, describes how we will meet our customer service commitment as an organisation. Our commitment is on the front cover of this document.

The purpose of this Strategy is to build on the Charter and provide a clear, long term guide about how we will deliver on our commitment and improve customer service performance.

This Plan describes many of the actions we will complete over the next three years to continuously improve the customer service experience.

## Our customers

The strategy defines our 'customers' as Surf Coast Shire community members, ratepayers and visitors, businesses, other organisations and levels of government working with Council, and Council staff.



# About Surf Coast Shire

Surf Coast Shire is blessed with a beautiful coastline, bushland and rural environment. We are 120km south-west of Melbourne, 21km south of Geelong and close to the Geelong Ring Road. This makes our shire an appealing destination for holiday makers, international visitors and those looking to make a permanent sea change. Some of the world's best surfing locations and the start of the iconic Great Ocean Road feature among our many attractions.

The shire is home to nine distinct townships: Aireys Inlet, Anglesea, Deans Marsh, Fairhaven, Jan Juc, Lorne, Moriac, Torquay and Winchelsea. Each has a keen sense of community, a unique identity and a strong desire to protect and nurture the environment. There is also a significant rural population, including farming and residential properties.

Location and lifestyle continue to contribute to the Surf Coast Shire being one of Victoria's fastest growing municipalities. Total population has grown on average by 3.5% over the past five years (making it Victoria's sixth fastest growing Local Government Area over the same period) with current forecasts seeing the population reach 45,000 by 2031 (forecast .id).

One of the defining characteristics of the Surf Coast Shire is the part time nature of much of the population, because of its appeal as a holiday destination. More than 59% of home owners are not permanent residents. The peak overnight population in the summer of 2014 / 2015 was an estimated 85,000.

Surf Coast Shire has a larger than Victorian average population of the following age groups:

- Primary schoolers
- Parents and homebuilders (aged 35 to 49)
- Older workers and pre-retirees
- Empty nesters and retirees
- People born in Australia and speak English as a first language

There is a smaller proportion than the Victorian average of:

- Tertiary independent
- Young workforce (18-34)
- Indigenous - slightly lower than the Victorian average and less than half of the regional Victoria average

Surf Coast Shire residents frequently report better levels of health than their Victorian and rural Victorian counterparts. Surf Coast Shire lower levels of socio-economic disadvantage than the state average.

More population information about Surf Coast Shire communities is available at [www.surfcost.vic.gov.au](http://www.surfcost.vic.gov.au) under 'My Council'.

The community profile and future growth factors have a profound impact on our customer service requirements in terms of being ready to adapt and innovate to meet the needs of our unique community.



# Our services

The Council Plan 2013-2017 defines our services under five main themes as shown in the following table.

Theme	Strategic objective	Service categories
<b>Environment</b>	We pursue innovative and sustainable practices that will preserve and enhance our natural environment for all, by being socially responsible and environmentally aware.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environment and Open Space</li> <li>• Waste Management</li> </ul>
<b>Governance</b>	We are committed to delivering a transparent, high performing and sustainable organisation that engages with the community and adopts robust risk management practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive Services</li> <li>• Council Support</li> <li>• Financial Management</li> <li>• Communications and Public Relations</li> <li>• Governance and Regulatory Services</li> <li>• Organisational Development</li> <li>• Information Services</li> </ul>
<b>Communities</b>	We actively engage with our diverse and growing communities to establish quality services, healthy and safe environments, and long-term community partnerships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Development</li> <li>• Early Years</li> <li>• Positive Ageing</li> <li>• Environmental Health</li> <li>• Municipal and Emergency Management</li> </ul>
<b>Infrastructure</b>	We are committed to understanding and meeting our community's needs for accessible, well maintained and safe infrastructure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engineering Services</li> <li>• Civic Works</li> <li>• Parks and Open Space</li> <li>• Asset Management and Protection</li> </ul>
<b>Development and Growth</b>	We foster healthy and sustainable communities by supporting tourism and rural businesses, and encouraging clean industries and development that respect the Surf Coast's environment and lifestyle.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning Development</li> <li>• Administration</li> <li>• Economic Development and Tourism</li> </ul>

This table provides an insight into local government's complexity with Council delivering more than 100 services within the service categories described above.

Our organisation currently operates seven customer service software systems to deal with the variety of business requirements. The main customer request management (CRM) system is accessible to almost all staff. The remaining systems are more discrete and range from record management software to specific service software, such as those relating to Home and Community Care or Planning.

While we have a dedicated customer service team, every employee has a customer service role to play, from dealing with an external request from a community member through to delivering internal customer service to a colleague.

### Customer service delivery

Analysis of our 2013-14 customer service transaction costs via front of house customer service at the Surf Coast Shire Civic Centre in Torquay shows each customer service interaction costs the organisation \$2.75. This includes phone enquiries, face-to-face customer service and processing payments. The vast majority of customer service enquiries are made via telephone.

- **84%** of Council's payments are done online whilst **16%** are done via mail, counter and call centre

Council currently contracts after hour's customer service provision to an external provider. When a customer calls outside of Council's business hours, they receive a message that provides general information and a number of options including an option to our emergency after hour's service and other options including that the caller can leave a message.

There is a clear opportunity to improve existing channels and provide new channels after hours. This includes customers lodging requests online which enhances the customer experience and provides an efficiency gain to the organisation. This opportunity will be described further into this document.



# Our promise

## Service Excellence Charter

*We are committed to working in partnership with our customers to deliver an excellent service experience.*

### We will...

- Treat you with courtesy, respect and understanding.
- Be clear on what we can and can't do.
- Make it as simple as possible for you to deal with us.
- Provide skilled and professional staff.
- Provide you with clear and relevant information.
- Work with you to identify and resolve issues.
- Make decisions that are consistent, fair and in line with Council policies and relevant legislation.
- Resolve each request and let you know the result.

### As a customer you will see us:

- Being on time and prepared for face-to-face meetings.
- Responding to all emails and correspondence within 10 business days of receipt.
- Responding to correspondence regarding statutory processes in line with legislative requirements and time frames.
- Answering your phone call within 30 seconds.
- Responding to telephone messages within one business day.
- Conducting surveys to measure our performance.

### We will measure our performance by:

- Undertaking annual community satisfaction surveys of our customers to ensure we are:
- Maintaining or improving our annual community satisfaction rating for customer service.
- Meeting or exceeding the customer service rating average for large rural shires.
- Improving individual business unit customer service performance.
- Improving and independently measuring our responsiveness and customer engagement skills.

# How we are performing

*‘Treat customers with respect, cut the red tape, be clear on what you can and can’t do and when you can do it,’*

Surf Coast resident 2013.

In preparing this strategy, we reviewed internal and independent data, qualitative and quantitative, to provide us with a better understanding of our customers and their service needs.

## What key information do we know about our community with regard to customer service?

- **92%** said treating customers with courtesy and respect is important with **74%** reporting satisfaction with our performance in this category (Customer Service Charter Survey 2013).
- **90%** said making it simple to deal with Council is important (Customer Service Charter Survey 2013).
- **80%** rated customer service as very good or good during their most recent contact (Department of Transport, Planning and Local Infrastructure - DTPLI - Customer Satisfaction Survey 2014).
- The 28-34 years age group is the most satisfied with Council’s customer service (DTPLI Customer Satisfaction Survey 2014).
- Winchelsea Ward residents scored us 76 for customer service satisfaction followed by Torquay Ward on 72 and Lorne and Anglesea wards on 66 (DTPLI Customer Satisfaction Survey 2014).
- **88%** said that resolving each request and letting customers know the result is important but only **49%** were satisfied with our performance against this standard (Customer Service Charter Survey 2013).
- **82%** of Surf Coast Shire dwellings have internet connection (ABS Census 2011).
- Compared to the state average of 3.2%, only 0.2% of our population do not speak English or speak English well (ABS Census 2011).





Our customer service performance can be described further through a number of independent and Council-led evaluations. Each year, the State Government conducts a Community Satisfaction Survey through the Department of Transport, Planning and Local Infrastructure (DTPLI). Results are summarised in the following table.

#### Customer Satisfaction Survey (N = 600)

Performance Measures	Surf Coast 2012	Surf Coast 2013	Surf Coast 2014	Large Rural Shires 2014	State-wide 2014
Overall performance	59	61	64	57	61
<b>Customer service</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>72</b>
Overall council direction	51	57	57	51	53

More than 350 residents were engaged via surveys, workshops and other means in the development of our Customer Service Charter. The following table summarises the outcomes of this process.

#### Customer Service Charter consultation 2013 (N= 351)

Measure	Somewhat satisfied or below	Satisfied or very satisfied
Treat you with courtesy, respect and understanding	15%	74%
Be clear on what we can and can't do	24%	62%
Make it as simple as possible for you to deal with us	28%	61%
Provide skilled and professional staff	17%	65%
Work with you to identify and resolve issues	25%	46%
Resolve each request and let you know the result	24%	49%
Be on time and prepared for face-to-face meetings	9%	42%
Respond to emails and letters within 10 business days	11%	51%
Respond to correspondence regarding statutory processes in line with legislative requirements and timeframes	10%	42%
Answer your phone calls within 30 seconds	15%	47%
Respond to telephone messages within one business day	14%	68%

NB: Measures not totalling 100% indicates the percentage of respondents who had not recently dealt with Council.

Our customer service performance is also measured independently via a mystery shopper program implemented by Customer Service Benchmarking Australia. This involves 50 random calls during a quarter measuring connect time, greeting skills, agent manner, enquiry resolution and communication skills. The results for the past three years are summarised below.

<b>2012-13</b>	<b>11th out of 48 councils</b> <b>26th out of 227 total companies</b>
<b>2013-14</b>	<b>9th out of 47 councils</b> <b>30th out of 220 total companies</b>
<b>2014-15</b>	<b>4th out of 43 councils</b> <b>13th out of 179 total companies</b>

### Benchmarking outstanding performance

We found a number of other organisations are consistently performing at a high level when they are independently evaluated for customer service performance. These organisations, both government and business, consistently display **Eight Key Customer Service Features** which include:

- A customer service Charter or Guarantee
- Publish service delivery standards
- Report back to the community on service delivery
- Multichannel customer request system open 24/7
- Online payments available via website
- Online bookings for facilities, parks etc.
- Customer service live chat
- Clear complaints process

While the customer service performance results of Surf Coast Shire show recent improvement, there are a number of key features we need to strengthen to continue this improvement.

This strategy identifies that Surf Coast Shire will focus on strengthening these four key features over the next three years:

1. Publish service delivery standards
2. Publish a regular service delivery report
3. Multichannel customer request system open 24/7
4. Clear complaints process

### How this impacts delivering “Our Promise”

Understanding our customers and current performance has informed key considerations for this strategy and how we deliver on our promise. This includes:

- We must maintain the features that have driven the recent improvement in customer service performance. We will compliment rather than replace existing channels when introducing new customer service channels.
- We will open new customer request channels, including online, enabling customers to lodge requests 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- We will continue to improve the customer service experience and make it easy by:
  - Reducing red tape and keep customers at the heart of our services
  - Making the website easier to navigate
  - Using plain English when communicating with customers
- The results of recent evaluations show incremental improvements in our customer service performance across the board. Greater improvement is required to:
  - Cater better for non-permanent residents and those who are time poor. Online customer requests will enable us to do this better
  - Work with customers to identify and resolve issues
  - Let customers know the result of their enquiry
- We will streamline the complaints process and communicate this with the community.
- We will be clearer with our community by publishing the response times and service standards to expect from particular business units. We will share our performance with our community.

This has shaped our Strategic Directions and Tactical Actions on page 13.

# Future Trends

## Self-service and multi-channel

Customers today are looking to communicate and do simple transactions in time and cost-effective ways. They expect to be able to access the information and services they need in a way that suits them (ie via different channels and times). The rapidly increasing use of newer technologies is driving demand for all hours service availability and self-service options.

Self-service can be defined as the use of technology tools to empower customers to address their own needs without interacting with a live agent. An online bill payment is a simple example.

Local government is no different. According to a survey conducted in 2013<sup>1</sup>, 66% of Australian councils use traditional service delivery methods (eg telephone, face-to-face, letters, emails). The past two years have however seen increasing use of digital platforms as follows:

- **26%** increase in Facebook
- **25%** increase in email
- **20%** increase in Twitter, and
- **18%** increase in mobile phone applications.

Customers stated they were likely in the year ahead to look for online self-service (48%), social media (26%) and mobile applications (22%). In terms of service delivery, they placed high value on consistent, visible information (26%), quality of service (26%), dynamic, adaptive services (16%) and speed of service (13%).

The survey results show that improving customer service through multi-channel delivery represented the top priority for the next 18 months among a majority of councils. Increasing the number of services available across different channels, providing a high level of integration and service coordination across the channels presents significant opportunities for improving the customer service experience.

An international study by Van Belleghem<sup>2</sup> shows 70% of consumers expect corporate websites to include self-service tools. Key benefits for customers include accessing services and information outside normal business hours and more efficient processing of their enquiry. Benefits for organisations include reduced transaction costs and improved service delivery.

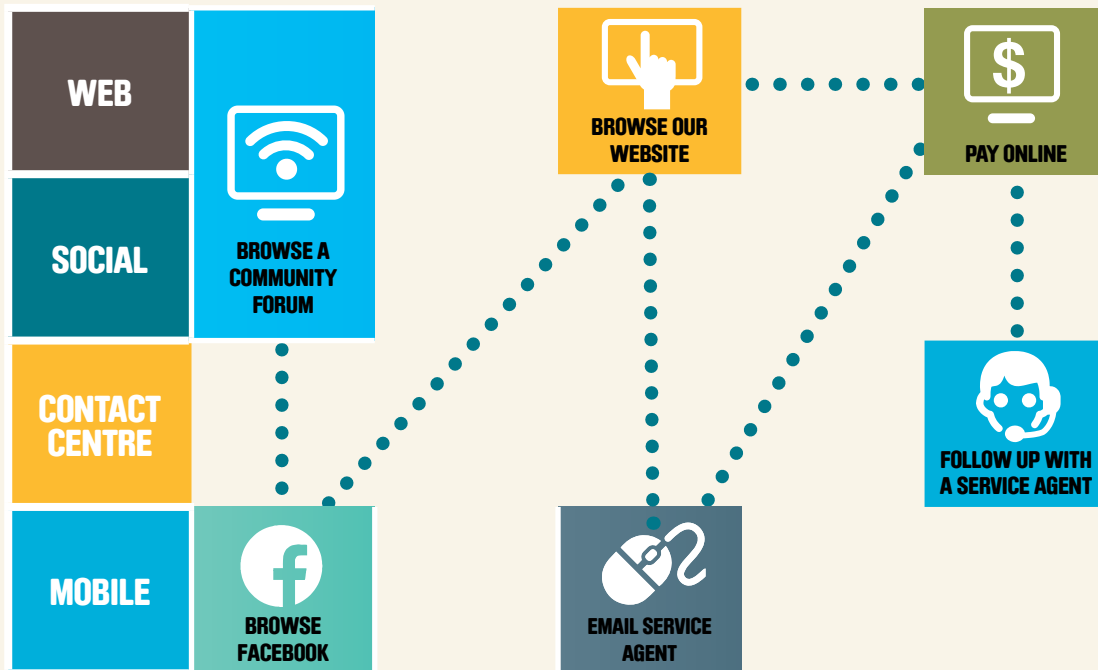
As a tool, self-service forms part of a broad, integrated customer service program comprising multiple channels. It is crucial to offer self-service as a value-add to help customers address common questions themselves.

<sup>1</sup> *Australia's Fifth Quadrant Customer Experience, Strategy and Research Organisation 2013.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Future of Customer Service, Van Belleghem 2013*

### Consistency

Customers expect service to be consistent across multiple channels, offering the ability to start an interaction in one channel and complete it in another, receiving the same standard of customer service along the way. An example is shown in the following diagram:



Service and information should be consistent across all interactions: personalised, professional and friendly, regardless of method of contact.

According to, Forrester 2012<sup>3</sup>, organisations must work on standardising the customer service experience across these communication channels. There is a need to make it easier for customers to use multiple communication channels during this process and not have to repeat prior interactions.

<sup>3</sup> *Navigate the Future of Customer Service - Forrester 2012*



## Engaged staff

While tools and processes play significant roles in delivering great customer service, research confirms the importance of engaging staff as a key factor in achieving excellent customer service.

According to a study by Aon Hewitt<sup>4</sup>, highly engaged employees drive substantially higher outcomes in terms of efficiency, quality, innovation and customer service. This is backed up by several studies, which demonstrated a strong correlation between employees' engagement scores and their customer service productivity scores.

These studies confirm undisputable links between staff engagement and subsequent customer satisfaction. In summary, the correlations in these studies have been recognised as being stronger than:

- smoking and incidence of lung cancer
- alcohol and aggressive behavior, and
- sleeping pills and improvement in insomnia

## How this impacts delivering “Our Promise”

Understanding future trends has informed key considerations for this strategy and how we deliver on our promise. This includes:

- We will strengthen the culture and enhance the levels of staff engagement including how staff communicate across departments.
- We will strengthen the skills and enthusiasm of staff to deliver great customer service.
- We will ensure staff contact customers within the designated timeframes and inform the customer of the process and timeframe for resolution.
- We will devise strategies to deal with customer service requests via social media.
- We will open new customer request channels, including online, enabling customers to lodge requests 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- We need to ensure there are up to date, integrated and functional systems in place to deliver the complex service delivery needs.

This has shaped our Strategic Directions and Tactical Actions on page 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Trends in Employee Engagement - Aon Hewitt, 2013*

# Our strategic directions and actions »

Understanding our customers' needs, our current performance and future trends enabled us to develop four key strategic directions and accompanying tactical actions. They are described in this table along with some project examples.

By following these directions and implementing the key actions, we will improve the customer service experience and deliver on "Our Promise".

Strategic direction	
1	<b>Understanding and empathy</b> Listen to customers to understand their expectations and offer service that we ourselves would expect. »
2	<b>Make it easy</b> Develop systems that make it easy for customers to get the information and service they are seeking. »
3	<b>Personalise the experience</b> Develop multiple access points to Council services and information. »
4	<b>Inspire a culture of service</b> Develop people across Council to build a culture where customer service is everyone's responsibility. »



## Tactical actions

## Project and program examples

- 1.1 Be responsive to customer enquiries and follow up after requests are completed.
- 1.2 Use plain English when communicating with customers.
- 1.3 Create unit level customer service standards and share them with our community.
- 1.4 Provide opportunities for feedback and suggestions on how we can improve.

Design a plain English staff training program and include plain English training as part of the corporate training package for relevant staff.

Be clear on how Council will measure service delivery and what our community can expect.

Publish and report on council-wide service standards.

Create an ongoing web communication channel where people can provide regular customer service feedback. Actively promote this channel.

- 2.1 Reduce red tape and keep customers at the heart of our services.
- 2.2 Provide clear communication of our standards and what we can and can't deliver
- 2.3 Improve consistency and service efficiency.
- 2.4 Streamline processes.

Undertake a review of the Surf Coast Shire website including checking for compliance with relevant disability access legislation and policies.

The review will also consider web design for smart phone and tablet compatibility.

Streamline the complaints process and communicate this with staff and the community.

- 3.1 Offer multiple customer service channels, including opportunities for self-service during non- business hours
- 3.2 Embrace technology to enhance the customer service experience.
- 3.3 Ensure consistency in the customer service experience across multiple channels.

Improvement to the website will include an online customer self-service channel enabling customers to lodge requests 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Investigate how we deal with customer service enquiries via social media.

Undertake analysis of "live chat" as an option for customer service.

- 4.1 Strengthen the culture and enhance the levels of staff engagement.
- 4.2 Improve the skills and enthusiasm of staff to deliver great customer service.
- 4.3 Educate people across the organisation about customer service expectations.
- 4.4 Empower staff to resolve customer service issues and improve the customer service experience.
- 4.5 Continue to develop strong internal relationships.

Measure and analyse staff engagement levels and organisational culture.

Build on staff development programs.

Engage staff in developing a customer focussed culture.

Continue to develop strong internal relationships and ongoing opportunities for collaboration between staff and units for improved service delivery.

# How this strategy links to our Council Plan

We work hard as an organisation to service our customers and support Council's vision of:

*Working towards an engaged, innovative and sustainable community.*

Our Council Plan 2013-17 identifies customer service as a core regulatory service, described in detail under Objective 2.2 - High performing accountable organisation.

The strategy links directly to the following measures articulated in the Council Plan for this objective:

- Respond to all emails and letters within 10 business days of receipt.
- Respond to correspondence regarding statutory processes in line with legislative requirements and time frames.
- Answer your call within 30 seconds.
- Respond to telephone messages within one business day.
- Conduct surveys to measure our performance.
- Improve customer service performance in independent measurement activities annually





# How we developed this strategy

Our starting point involved reviewing the Customer Service Charter including how it was originally developed. We then undertook an analysis of the Surf Coast Shire community profile, including future growth forecasts, and reviewed various consultation and performance data. These included independent measures such as the State Government's Customer Satisfaction Survey and Customer Service Benchmarking Australia's Mystery Shopper Program.

A detailed assessment of our current internal systems and an external scan of best practice and new technologies also informed the strategy's development.

This information supported us in identifying strategies and actions to meet our customer service commitment, and in mapping out a long-term approach to improving performance.

The following diagram provides an overview of the strategy development process.



