

Town of Whitby

Staff Report

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Report Title: Customer Service Strategy and Service Whitby Update

Report to: Committee of the Whole

Date of meeting: January 20, 2025

Report Number: CLK 02-25

Department(s) Responsible:

Office of the Town Clerk

Submitted by:

Christopher Harris, Town Clerk

**Acknowledged by M. Gaskell,
Chief Administrative Officer**

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1. Recommendation:

That Council receive Report CLK 02-25 for information.

2. Highlights:

- The resources required to proceed with the recommendations in the Customer Service Strategy received final approval through the 2024 Budget.
- Staff have begun the process to create a centralized customer service framework, Service Whitby, with the first phase involving the consolidation of the Tax and Clerks front counters at Town Hall coming into effect on February 3, 2025.
- The Service Whitby project will be implemented in phases, allowing for the onboarding of additional departments and service areas. The initial project plan is scheduled to roll out over the next three years, from 2025 to 2027.
- A Customer Relationship Management (CRM) solution in the form of Microsoft Dynamics 365 has been procured and Staff are in the last stages of finalizing a Request for Proposals (RFP) document to retain an implementation partner.

3. Background:

Developing the Customer Service Strategy

In 2021 the Town finalized its first ever [Customer Service Strategy](#) representing a significant milestone in achieving the objectives of the customer priority identified in the 2019 to 2022 Corporate Strategic Plan. Whitby again renewed its commitment to providing exceptional customer service by including that as an area of focus in the 2023 to 2026 Community Strategic Plan along with the objective to fulfill the recommendations of the Customer Service Strategy. These recommendations included:

- Creating a dedicated customer service function, Service Whitby, which will transfer customer service workload from departments
- Implement a CRM and a customer portal to better manage customer processes and provide more opportunities for customers to digitally self serve
- Define payment types the Town will take, assess the financial impact of changing available payment methods, and determine payments by service
- Implement a knowledgebase with information on Town services and external service providers to ensure better consistency in answering customer inquiries
- Liaise with the Region of Durham to assess the opportunities for integration with myDurham 311

Customer Expectations

Through consultation undertaken during the Customer Service Strategy's development, including focus groups with specific stakeholders, the following practices were identified that lead to a positive experience for customers:

- Prompt and simple - Customers appreciated their matter being handled quickly. Where processes had been made simple for the customer, they tended to have a more favourable experience.
- Getting to the right person - Customers appreciated getting to the right person quickly.
- Knowing the status of my matter - Where the status of a request was shared with a customer and updated, they were happier with the process.
- Plain language - Some services of municipalities are technical, but in all cases, if plain language can be used, customers felt happier about what was happening and what was required of them.
- Few contacts - While some inquiries and requests can involve many staff at the Town, customers found it easier to navigate when they had one person who would manage interactions with the other staff.
- Having empathy in more complicated situations - Not all customer service situations can be dealt with quickly. When the process included empathy for the customer, particularly when the customer was unhappy at the beginning of the process, there was more likely to be a positive outcome.

Comparator Municipalities

Given customer expectations, and that expectations about what good customer service looks like continues to evolve, many peers have been moving to a centralized customer

service model over the last two decades. It has been found that a centralized model provides greater transparency, improved productivity, and consistent customer service standards. A discussion with peers when completing the Customer Service Strategy found that a centralized model would give residents a better experience interacting with the municipality for the following reasons:

- **Service standards:** this could relate to the hours of access or the speed of response, but most importantly – getting to the right person the first time.
- **Access:** Having one number, one email, or one desk to access services makes it easier for residents to know how to access services from the municipality.
- **Consistency:** All customer service staff are trained the same way, have the same resources, and tend to be more consistent in their service than when it is distributed across departments.
- **Costs:** Some efficiency is gained with specialization and by implementing tools that make it easier for customers to self serve at a time and place convenient for them. The general sentiment about the order of increasing cost was online < chat < phone < in-person < email.
- **Range of channels:** When customer service is distributed, it can be difficult to make a case for offering service across more channels. However, when centralized, the case often improves and can include looking at online, chat, and self serve kiosk options.

Strong Customer Service Culture

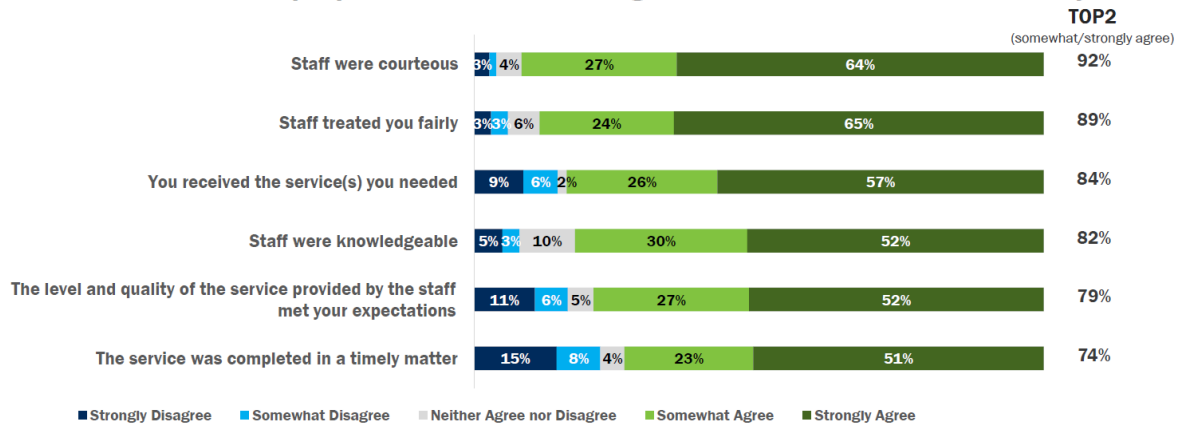
The Customer Service Strategy validated that Whitby has a strong customer service culture and Staff strive to provide excellent customer service. It was commented by the consultants who assisted with the Strategy's development that Whitby's commitment to customer excellence is not something observed in every municipality.

The observations on Whitby's positive approach to customer service have been reinforced through the results of community surveys Whitby has undertaken since 2016. The 2024 community survey found that based on recent contact with the Town, 92% of respondents found that Staff were courteous and 89% of respondents reported that they felt Staff treated them fairly. See below for an excerpt from the 2024 survey's results pertaining to customer service delivery.

Customer Service Delivery



About 9 in 10 residents agree the staff were courteous during their recent contact with the Town. A similar proportion of residents agree that staff treated them fairly.



Q6a. I am going to read you a list of statements. Thinking of your most recent contact with the Town of Whitby, we would like to know if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, or neither agree nor disagree with each. 13
 Sample Size: n=349
 Base: Respondents that have interacted with the Town 1 to 8+ times in the past year (CATI), excluding "Don't recall/Not applicable" responses

4. Discussion:

Centralized Customer Service

Notwithstanding the excellent customer service Staff strive to provide, the decentralized nature of service delivery at the Town and historical development of processes around service and not customer needs formed part of the rationale for the Customer Service Strategy’s recommendation to proceed with a centralized customer service model.

When reviewing what to call Whitby’s new centralized customer service model, Staff identified that there is an existing trend and recognized naming convention associated with identifying these consolidated customer service centres as “service” areas. For example, both the provincial and federal governments call their community customer service centres Service Ontario and Service Canada. Municipal comparators have also stuck with this naming convention, examples being Service Oshawa, Service Oakville, and Service Burlington. Perhaps to distinguish from the naming convention used by lower tier municipalities in their jurisdiction, upper tier regional municipalities have chosen a different naming convention such as Access Halton, Peel’s Customer Contact Centre, and myDurham 311.

Staff are proposing to use “Service Whitby” as the name for Whitby’s new centralized customer contact centre.

Planning for Service Whitby

Following the 2024 budget approval, the Senior Manager Customer Service and Customer Service Analyst positions were filled and began focusing on detailed task analysis for Phase 1 of Service Whitby, specifically examining opportunities for the Tax and Clerk front counter operations.

In addition to the detailed planning required to launch Phase 1 of Service Whitby, Staff have also been building on the recommendations of the Customer Service Strategy and developing a vision and strategic objectives for Service Whitby. Through work undertaken during the Strategy's development and further internal consultation with the Senior Leadership Team and other key stakeholders, the following vision and objectives have been developed to guide the development and operations of Service Whitby:

Service Whitby Vision: Delivering exceptional and innovative customer service that is seamless and accessible - connecting with customers wherever they live, work, and explore.

Service Whitby Strategic Objectives:

1. Increase Customer Satisfaction: Creating one window for customers to deliver consistent, reliable, and customer-centric services.
2. Strengthen Brand Reputation: Building trust and confidence with customers through personalized, scalable service delivery that predicts and proactively responds to the customer's evolving needs.
3. Modernize Customer Experience: Integrating advanced technologies, inclusive practices, and streamlined processes for smooth and efficient service delivery.
4. Enhance Customer Engagement: Identifying new opportunities for communication and outreach to customers to strengthen connections and build relationships.
5. Improve Service Flexibility: Adapting service delivery methods to offer customers convenient, tailored services that align with their needs, schedules, and lifestyles.

Service Whitby – Phase 1

Phase 1 of Service Whitby will see the existing Tax Cashier and Legislative Services Clerk positions transition into new Service Whitby Associate roles to achieve an improved customer experience. Service Whitby Associates will be cross trained to enhance first-contact resolution and the customer experience by removing the existing separation of duties and having more Staff provide the same services.

As an example of what Phase 1 of Service Whitby will improve, we can contrast the current to the future experience of a customer wishing to have a document commissioned. The current process, being designed around service delivery, requires the customer to first identify which station at the front counter at Town Hall they need to visit. The customer is directed to the Clerk's counter and the process to confirm that the document is eligible to be commissioned begins. Once the document eligibility is confirmed the customer is then directed to make payment at a separate counter because only the Tax Cashiers are trained to handle cash and take payments. Once payment is made, the customer returns to the Clerk's counter to have their document commissioned. This process results in the customer having to visit two service desks and potentially wait in line in both instances. Under the Service Whitby framework where all front counter staff are cross trained to provide the same services under one job description, the customer will only have to interact with one person who can provide for the initial greeting, commissioning service, and payment acceptance. Through the

centralized model and by designing processes around customers' needs, the customer experience will be greatly improved.

Service Whitby – Single Point of Contact

During the Customer Service Strategy's development, residents and Council both advocated for a single contact point at the Town that could be responsible for ensuring requests are routed and completed by all departments that need to be involved. While customers will not be precluded from contacting Staff directly if they know who they need to speak to, Service Whitby will offer those less familiar with the Town's internal structure and service delivery to access many Town services through one window via phone, email, and in person. Later phases and technology enablement will see customers being able to access Town services through chat and online channels.

In terms of what assistance Service Whitby will provide to customers, the Customer Service Strategy considered the role of Service Whitby in terms of 'tiers', noting that not all interactions with customers are suitable to be addressed by a centralized customer service team. The Strategy defined different customer interactions as follows:

- Tier 1 – general inquiries, questions, and information requests
- Tier 2 – intake, applications, and transactions
- Tier 3 – service delivery

With the objective being to resolve a high number of customer requests on first contact, the Service Whitby team will respond to all tier one inquiries, many tier two, and few tier three. Phase 1 will likely see more tier 3 services provided by Service Whitby than are anticipated in later phases, mostly due to the nature of work in the Tax and Clerks divisions allowing for service delivery on first contact. Unlike the example of commissioning a document described above that can be provided on first contact, many other Town services require department Staff to review and action a request, often through the application of specialized expertise or a dispatch to the site. For example, in the case of a resident wishing to report a pothole, while the Service Whitby team can provide information about service level standards to review and fill potholes and intake a complaint regarding, Operations Staff ultimately are responsible for providing the tier 3 service delivery to investigate and fill the pothole.

Technology Enablement – Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

A CRM is required to ensure Service Whitby operates effectively as it will allow Staff to track all incoming inquiries and requests from intake to completion, and thus provide a full view of customer interactions. The CRM will need to have a foundational implementation where the key functionality is configured that will include integration with the Town's telephone solution, Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) solution to take payments, and building of a knowledgebase to supply staff with information about Town services.

After the foundational configuration of the CRM, specific processes to facilitate the intake and tracking of service requests will be configured in the software. As an added complexity, many of these processes require integration with specialized operational systems used by departments for work management. The vision is to leverage the CRM

to provide more online services to residents through a portal that allows residents to log in to complete transactions and see the status and history of their matters. The Town currently offers such functionality on a limited basis and specific to a particular type of service. For example, residents can access, manage, and pay for most recreational programming online through ActiveNet.

In 2024 the Town leveraged its existing Enterprise Agreement with Microsoft to secure pricing and licensing for Microsoft Dynamics 365 CRM. Staff recommended the use of Microsoft Dynamics 365 for the following reasons:

- The Region of Durham is using Microsoft Dynamics as its technology platform to support myDurham 311. Having both tiers of government use Microsoft Dynamics will allow for the future potential to share knowledgebase articles and service requests across providers in addition to leverage the Region's knowledge and experience building out their CRM platform.
- Utilization of the existing Microsoft's Volume Licensing Program through the Microsoft Enterprise Agreements ensures responsible use of taxpayer dollars and that costs are competitive with what other public sector entities pay.
- As Service Whitby will occur through a phased build out and given the desire to configure the CRM in incremental steps in line with Service Whitby phases, it was identified that leveraging the ability to purchase licenses under existing agreements on an as needed basis was the most cost-effective method.

A Request for Proposals document is currently being finalized to retain a partner to support implementing the Microsoft Dynamics 365 CRM solution. This project is targeted to commence in Q2 2025 with an operational CRM being ready in Q1 2026.

Service Whitby – Phased Implementation

As recommended in the Customer Service Strategy, Service Whitby will be built out through carefully planned phases to ensure that changes related to people, processes, technology, and physical space are approached thoughtfully and appropriately sequenced. This phased approach will minimize disruption for customers, residents, and staff while maintaining fiscal responsibility and effectively managing available resources.

The focus remains on enhancing the customer experience seamlessly across all channels by aligning improvements to meet the needs of the community and ensuring a consistent, high-quality service delivery. Identified phases include:

Phase 1: consolidate the Town Hall Tax and Clerks front counter operations and design, develop, and implement the CRM.

Phase 2: review opportunities with Enforcement Services.

Phase 3: review opportunities with the Operations Division of Community Services.

Phase 4: migrate the MOC Cityworks process from the Cityworks to Dynamics CRM software. Explore next steps and additional opportunities for improving the customer experience.

Phases 1 to 3 are currently anticipated to occur between 2025 and 2027, with Phase 4 planned for 2028 and beyond. The length of time associated with the project phases is due to the complexity of reviewing the many processes involved, integrating a CRM with the Town's various work management solutions, and considerably identifying staffing implications.

Partnering with Whitby Public Library and Recreation Centres

As Service Whitby evolves, staff will explore the opportunity to partner with the Whitby Public Library and Community Services to offer additional customer service options for residents at library branches and recreation facilities. With these locations having expanded operating hours and existing in person front desk coverage, there is the possibility of offering customers the option to obtain information, make payments, submit inquiries or complaints, and/or manage other select services at more locations around the Town and for expanded hours.

myDurham 311 Partnership

Staff have already engaged in discussions and will be working closely with the Region of Durham to ensure the handoff for customers between the Region's 311, Service Whitby, and other Town service desks are seamless. The Town has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Region which includes service standards and stipulations for the handling of the transferring of inquiries between the Town and Region. Further, knowledge articles on Town services have been created and shared with the Region to support accurate information and resolution by myDurham 311 agents for certain Town services.

Review of Front Counters at Town Facilities

In line with the ongoing Office Modernization Project led by Community Services that seeks to incrementally modernize staff workspaces based on space constraints and hybrid work, staff will also be reviewing the optimal location and layout of front counters. The central location for Service Whitby will be Town Hall where the existing Tax and Clerks front counters are located. As such, as phases of the project are implemented, the utilization of front counters at the Branch Office at 3050 Garden Street, Operations Centre, and future Enforcement Services Building needs to be considered. Staff are in the preliminary stages of this review and next steps involve reviewing considerations around the customer experience and documenting adjacency requirements of divisions and departments from both an internal collaboration and customer experience perspective.

Customer Excellence Training

As part of the Town's focus of delivering exceptional customer service, most frontline staff across the Town participated in a full day of Customer Excellence Training in 2024. This training focused on how the Town can provide diverse and inclusive service delivery, building tactical customer service skills, managing difficult situations with empathy and confidence, and teaching de-escalation techniques. By providing this type of training on a regular basis, the Town is ensuring that it continues to uphold its commitment to delivering outstanding customer service.

5. Financial Considerations:

As part of the 2025 to 2027 multi-year budget, additional amounts of \$320,000 in 2025 and \$75,000 in 2026 were adopted in the capital budget (capital project #51237003) for the Customer Service Strategy implementation. These funds, in addition to the \$1,575,000 in carry over from the 2023 and 2024 capital budgets, will be used primarily to pay for and phase in Microsoft Dynamics 365 licensing costs and CRM system implementation and configuration, with the assistance of a certified implementation partner. The annual software maintenance/ licensing costs for the CRM, \$275,000/annum, will be phased into the Town’s operating budget over 2025 to 2028 as the solution is built out.

6. Communication and Public Engagement:

As part of the Customer Service Strategy’s development, public consultation was undertaken with residents, businesses, developers, and community groups. One-on-one interviews with Members of Council also occurred, allowing the opportunity to provide feedback based on their own experience, and the experiences of their constituents.

Extensive consultation was also conducted as part of the development of the Community Strategic Plan in 2023, which validated the community priorities identified during the creation of the Customer Service Strategy.

To ensure a successful launch of Service Whitby, key departmental processes and tasks must first be onboarded, along with the implementation of supporting technology, process improvements, and space considerations. With that in mind, communications regarding the establishment of Service Whitby will remain mostly internal, allowing time to balance these critical elements, ensuring a strong foundation for the new “Service Whitby” division before a full roll-out of the one-stop service hub to the community.

7. Input from Departments/Sources:

The implementation plan for the Customer Service Strategy and Service Whitby reflects the feedback gathered from the community during the development of both the Customer Service Strategy and the Community Strategic Plan.

Successful implementation will rely on a collaborative approach, engaging key partners such as Human Resources, Technology and Innovation Services (TIS), and Communication and Creative Services as well as close collaboration with each department as different phases progress and opportunities to enhance service delivery arise. This partnership-driven roadmap ensures that the initiative remains aligned with organizational priorities and community needs.

8. Strategic Priorities:

The report aligns with the Community Strategic Plan Whitby’s Government – Accountable & Responsive Pillar, objective 4.3, by outlining the implementation of the Customer Service Strategy and Service Whitby, which are crucial for achieving all measures of progress under action item 4.3.1:

- Begin implementing the customer contact centre
- Streamlining the digital customer experience through an online portal and/or Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software
- Expand and standardize payment options by offering e-transfer and/or credit card payment options on all invoices

Projects included in the roadmap will also realize progress in action items 4.3.2 and 4.3.3 through the implementation of modern technology systems enabling more comprehensive data and reporting for the Town and supporting recommendations under the Corporate IT Digital Strategic Plan.

The vision for Service Whitby focuses on improving access to services through processes, space, and technology enhancements that enable a more inclusive experience. By moving more services online, the Town will reduce the need for customers to travel to Town facilities and significantly reduce manual processes, minimizing paper usage. These efforts will collectively contribute to a more efficient, accessible, and environmentally friendly operation.

9. Attachments:

N/A