

Shaping Improvements with Our Customers: Customer Service Excellence Re-Accreditation



Context

Aberdeenshire Council's Development Management team, within the Planning and Economy Service, is accredited to the Customer Service Excellence (CSE) Standard, a nationally recognised UK Government benchmark for high-quality public service delivery. The CSE framework assesses organisations, focusing on delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism, staff attitude, and customer insight.

Accreditation provides both an independent validation of performance and a continuous improvement framework that embeds customer focus at every level. The process involves an annual external audit, where assessors review evidence, speak to staff across different roles, and engage directly with customers and stakeholders. This ongoing cycle of assessment, reflection, and action ensures that staff and customers remain central to service development and decision-making.

What Happened

In July 2025, Aberdeenshire Council successfully achieved reaccreditation, earning the Customer Service Excellence Standard whilst maintaining four Compliance Plus awards, the highest recognition within the CSE framework. These highlighted improvements in:

1. Using customer experience to improve service delivery and customer journeys.
2. Demonstrating a strong commitment to customer-focused recruitment, training, and development.
3. Benchmarking against other organisations to drive improvement.
4. Learning from feedback and complaints to improve processes and publicise action taken.

A further two Compliance Plus awards were gained in recognition of improved engagement bringing the total to six. It was noted that the customer satisfaction survey feedback response rates were low and not statistically valid and further methods need to be included to gain an accurate picture of customer satisfaction. This resulted in two partial compliances remaining and a focus on improving response rates will be implemented for 2025-26.

The audit recognised the service's proactive use of customer engagement with a forward-thinking approach to changes in national policy with extensive early engagement utilising all channels of communication - traditional and innovative. Feedback from questionnaires, Agent Forum, stakeholder engagement and staff is used to shape continuous improvement, including enhancements to templates, website, pre application online forms, energy map for communities to follow development, streamlined procedures, staff training and workshops. It is also acknowledged that the development of a Service Improvement Log helps track all projects and outcomes. Enhanced staff career progression scheme has been developed to promote recruitment and retention. Embedded culture of effective cross-departmental collaboration to improve the customer experience.

Areas of Collaboration

Developing the Customer Service Management System has provided a structured framework for collaboration with staff, consultees, and customers. Insights from the audit and customer feedback are shared across teams and with partners such as Robert Gordon University, where collaborative projects like Stonehaven: Past, Present, and Future showcase innovation and engagement.

Overall Result

The Development Management team achieved reaccreditation in 2025 with 49 compliances, six Compliance Plus awards, and only two partial compliances, reflecting a strong and embedded culture of customer service.



The external audit highlighted the team's positive culture, collaborative working, and openness to learning, while also identifying areas for continued development, including improving consistency across area teams, enhancing staff recognition, and expanding the use of digital tools.

Despite challenges such as budget pressures and the evolving legislative landscape, the service continues to maintain a high standard of delivery and a clear focus on customer experience.

Lessons Learned

1. Independent accreditation provides external validation and drives continuous improvement.
2. A consistent customer feedback loop, collecting, acting, and reporting back, builds trust.
3. Collaboration across departments and with external partners enhances innovation.
4. Consistency across area-based service delivery remains a key focus for ensuring quality.
5. Investing in soft skills is as important as improving systems and processes.
6. Sharing good practice and benchmarking with other authorities supports sector-wide improvement.

This case study has been prepared in collaboration by Aberdeenshire Council and the National Planning Improvement Team at the Improvement Service. We publish good practice case studies identified through our work on the National Planning Improvement Framework and the National Planning Hub. They aim to support the sharing of good practice and build collaboration across the sector in addressing common challenges. Please email us at npi@improvementservice.org.uk if your authority has a good practice case study to share.

