

22 November 2016		ITEM: 7
Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Customer Services Strategy		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Key	
Report of: Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications & Customer Services		
Accountable Head of Service: N/A		
Accountable Director: Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications & Customer Services		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

Customer expectations are rising, the local population is growing and changing, and in response we are increasingly required to strengthen our customer focus, use of innovative technology and build integrated service delivery models within the resources we have available.

The draft Customer Service Strategy sets out where the council is now, where it wants to be and how it will get there. It is intended to provide a strategic overview that will set the direction of travel to be delivered through service plans and other council strategies and procedures. The strategy is part of a wider programme of projects and brings these together to create a comprehensive plan of how we will improve service to our customers across all access channels.

The strategy acknowledges that in order to deliver the standard of customer services that will meet the expectations of an increasingly demanding public, we need to address issues of people, process, technology and organisation, managing our resources to optimum effect. To succeed it will be necessary to create a culture supported by the right operational procedures and infrastructure that will deliver high quality customer service, listening to the voice of the customer and employees, measuring customer satisfaction, embracing change and technology, and striving to continuously improve.

Throughout the strategy there is a strong emphasis on digital and self-service for customers that are able to utilise this method but recognition that a high standard of service, access and support must still be available for the customers that cannot.

This document will support a set of standards within a customer services charter to embed and support our drive to provide convenient, consistent, cost effective customer care.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 That the committee comment on the draft Customer Services Strategy at Appendix 1.

1.2 That the committee comment on the proposals for the service areas set out in Appendix 2.

1.3 That the committee comment on the savings proposals for customer services as set out at paragraph 4.2.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 Customer Services (the contact centre, reception, face-to-face, cashiers, careline and out of hours) returned to the Council from Serco in December 2015. This provided a new opportunity to consider the strategic direction for the service itself as well as the council's overall approach. The draft Customer Services Strategy, set out at Appendix 1, aims to address the following challenges:

- Inconsistent customer service standards across services
- Clarity and communication of what customers can expect including self-service options
- Customers mainly using more expensive channels such as face to face even for simple transactions available online
- Self-service not available for some high volume transactions
- Better understanding and use of digital methods
- Reduce avoidable contacts and promote proactive contact with residents
- Need to refresh contact centre telephony and implement other technology/ digital solutions i.e. web chat
- No single view of the customer for all contact channels i.e. web, email, face to face, telephone
- Opportunities for cross-council working, further service calls through the contact centre to deliver efficiencies and explore as a potential growth area and for income generation.

2.2 Approximately 38,000 telephone calls are handled by the contact centre each month with an additional 8,000 face-to-face visits to the civic offices. Residents are mainly contacting the council regarding:

- Housing benefits
- Council Tax

- Rents
- Environmental issues e.g. flytipping
- Waste e.g. missed bins

In addition, face-to-face enquiries are also commonly about parking permits and bus passes.

- 2.3 Many, although not all, of these services, or elements of them, are available online. My Account was introduced in October 2013 providing access to services and transactions online. This led to a reduction of 11% for calls between April 2014 and March 2016. In December 2015 there were 27,000 users which has risen to 43,000 in October 2016 following a communication campaign. The latest services to become available are bulky waste collections and registrars services with Council Tax e-billing and licensing services planned in 2016/17.
- 2.4 At present each time a customer enquiry is handled within Customer Services the resource cost alone is approximately £5 for face-to-face, £1.50 per telephone call and 15p online.
- 2.5 Thurrock residents, in the main, have the skills to access services online and utilise our existing self-service options. We already encourage and support customers to use the internet for straightforward transactions. This does not mean that improving the digital access options will mean that providing services through traditional methods such as telephone or face to face stops but that these channels will be reduced and freed up for those that need to use them – often residents with complex and sensitive needs.
- 2.6 We must aim to minimise the need for our customers to contact us but if they do, provide them with an excellent self-service experience that is quick and convenient and ensure we publicise other available contact channels for hard to reach groups including where support is available for example through the community hubs.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 The key recommendations in the strategy are summarised below:

1. Channel Migration - Accessibility – April 2017: Approve recommended services **as digital only** closing channels for contacts that add no value to the customer, maximising the use of resources for customers that really need our support or where there is no online solution. This will allow excellent support for vulnerable residents and assisted self-service via telephone or face to face where needed. See appendix 2 – Top query types and suggested channel. In addition continue to design further cost effective, efficient and user friendly digital means of contacting the council.

2. Channel Migration - Face to face channel – April 2018: Remove specific face to face service desks to allow for an increase in self-service facilities,

appointment service only for vulnerable service users. Provide a self-service scanning solution for requested documentation, a meet and greet floorwalker and business visitor self- service check-in solution instead of a reception desk and all customer services advisors multi- skilled to cover all Customer Service functions. This will enable flexibility of resource and appointments for vulnerable customers. A good time to complete these changes would be in line with the refurbishment of the ground floor to allow a period of adjustment for customers however these recommendations are not dependant on this.

3. Channel Migration - Assisted digital support – assisted digital support is for people that cannot use online services at first on their own. The support can be guiding a customer through the digital service, entering a user's information onto the digital service on their behalf initially and setting up their account so that they can continue to utilise this channel going forward. This can be provided via face to face, telephone or web chat. We should continue to provide this support via the contact centre, within the community hubs and within our face to face area at civic offices, always encouraging and supporting our customers to be able to utilise the easiest contact channels for the services where online is available.

4. Technology - 2017/18: Implement a new contact centre telephony solution, along with a new customer satisfaction, call recording and scheduling solution. Ensure new solution will link effectively for potential technology enhancements i.e. advanced IVR capability and potential Omni-channel (single view of the customer) technology solutions which should both be explored. The existing telephony system is due for replacement and there is an opportunity for us to potentially share a telephony platform with another council to reduce costs.

5. Organisational design – From 2016-19: Review the best fit for customer interaction across all departments, completing a review of customer demand and call volumes directed to specific service areas. Determine the best fit within the organisation as part of all service reviews by 2019. This would be an opportunity for us to review existing call volumes across all services and identify transactions not currently digital that would be better placed within the contact centre initially.

6. First time resolution and avoidable contact - 2017/18: We must reduce the need for our customers to contact us by reducing bureaucracy, learning from our mistakes and complaints, continuing to automate processes, process reengineering and working with partners to provide joined up services and manage demand e.g. failure demand, avoidable demand, value demand. Link to Customer and Demand Management Board and service reviews.

7. Growth - 2018/19: There is an opportunity for us to join forces with other local authorities for customer services delivery. This should be pursued as a potential growth area with a view to our customer services department providing services on behalf of other local authorities and generating income.

8. People and Culture - 2017/18: Embed the mission and principles for our customer service delivery and a set of service standards throughout the organisation. We need a holistic approach to Customer Services with customer care training available to **all** employees via classroom or e-learning. This should include the Customer Service, mission, promise and principles with clear standards of performance that are visible and transparent to our customers via a customer charter, We need to create a culture that supports the delivery of high quality customer services cross the organisation and partner organisations. We need to recruit the right people with the right attitude and behaviours and develop their skills to deliver continually improved services. In order to do this we need to provide clear leadership and governance arrangements to drive the strategy from the top and provide a shared vision that everyone can work towards. Our culture must have a high focus on digital and defined approach to digital innovation to empower our employees via digital tools and technology. We need a clear development and change management programme to support this along with a refresh of our current behaviour frameworks to reinforce the changes. Customer services should be part of everyone's objectives and included in all job descriptions and service plans - links to people and digital strategies.

9. Social media - 2017/18: Utilise information received via existing social media to its full potential to proactively reduce contact i.e. if we are made aware of a general issue or trend via social media we can be proactive to reduce the need for other customers to contact us.

10. Process Re-engineering - 2017/18: Process redesign and changing the way that we work across the council is key to the delivery of this strategy – links to service reviews.

11. Digital Principles - 2017/18: We must embed the digital principles within all services and through our digital strategy and this will be a high focus of all service reviews. We should be digital by default - link to people and digital strategies.

12. Community Options – Ongoing: Support the development of community hubs and consider additional community access points alongside service reviews so that community solutions can be explored collectively in ventures that manage demand and reshape our services – links to Customer and Demand Management board, Property Board and service reviews.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 The committee are invited to comment on the proposed Customer Services Strategy at Appendix 1 and specific proposals for services as set out in Appendix 2. This feedback will inform the final strategy and implementation.
- 4.2 Budget savings of £120k in 2017/18 and £100k in 2018/19 are proposed as part of the Council Spending Review and budget setting process against a total budget of £1.2m. The delivery of these savings is dependent on the

strategy being agreed by Cabinet in January 2017 in order to implement changes to the resources within Customer Services by the end of 2016/17.

- 4.3 Further savings, both within customer services and other back office areas across the council, could be realised in future years.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 Consultation, and development of the strategy, has taken place through the cross-council Customer and Demand Management Board, Digital Board and other internal customers including ICT and Directors Board.

- 5.2 Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee are invited to comment on the draft strategy as part of the consultation process ahead of the final strategy being presented to Cabinet in January 2017.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1 Delivering the vision, mission, actions and adhering to the principles within this strategy will help us transform our customers' experience. Our customers will have improved access to services, receive regular updates on service areas that are of interest to them and proactive contact to avoid them having to contact us at all. We will have a workforce with the right skills for the future and with the ability to guide our customers to the right services for them. We will be working closely with our communities to increase access and support and have strong partnerships in place that allow us to have local ambassadors to support local people.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Carl Tomlinson**
Finance Manager

Budget savings of £120k in 2017/18 and £100k in 2018/19 are proposed as part of the Council Spending Review and budget setting process. The delivery of these savings is dependent on the strategy being agreed by Cabinet in January 2017 in order to implement changes to the resources within Customer Services by the end of 2016/17.

Capital investment may be required in technological solutions to address some of the proposals set out in the strategy. Many of the proposals within the strategy already form part of the capital programme and digital board work programme.

The council continues to operate in a challenging financial environment and given the current MTFS position further budget savings may be required.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **David Lawson**
Monitoring officer

There are no legal implications.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**
**Community Development and Equalities
Manager**

An equality impact assessment has been undertaken. Whilst digital channels for accessing services and transacting with the council will be a primary focus going forward, assisted self-service, support at community hubs and existing channels such as face-to-face and telephone via the contact centre will remain, albeit reduced, for those most in need and unable to go online.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

- None

8. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- None

9. Appendices to the report

- Appendix 1 - Draft Customer Services Strategy
- Appendix 2 - Highest contact types and suggested action

Report Author:

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