

Thurrock Council

Community Equality Impact Assessment

Service area and lead officer

Name of service	Contact Management Operating Model
CEIA Lead Officer	Lorraine Surrey
CEIA Lead Officer job title	Project Manager
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Subject of this assessment

What specific policy, strategy, function or service is the subject of this assessment?
This CEIA will look at the management of contacts from residents and those doing business in the borough who currently use phone, email, portal and digital channels, and it will assess the impact of dealing with those contacts via Voice Automation, Customer Relationship Management system (CRM), and WebForms.
Borough-wide or location-specific?
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Borough-wide <input type="checkbox"/> Location-specific – please state locations below.
Click or tap here to enter text.
Why is this policy, strategy, function or service development or review needed?

The Council's current Contact Management model is dispersed, with activity spread across the Council and each Directorate retaining ownership of how they manage incoming demand from residents, businesses, partners, professionals, and Members. There are multiple front doors and direct channels to service areas, which has resulted in a Contact Management model which is inefficient, costly and provides an inconsistent experience.

Although the Council has made efforts to channel shift away from telephone and towards digital, through webforms and emails, this has increased the effort spent on dealing with transactional resident queries in the service areas.

By automating, digitising, and streamlining processes, the Council can realise significant savings and accelerate its journey to being 'digital by default' and offering resident-centred services.

Initial scoping has identified users in the following service areas as being immediate beneficiaries of further digitisation/automation of contact management:

- Customer Contact Centre
- Public Realm
- Adults Housing & Health (housing services)

1. Engagement, consultation and supporting information

- 1.1. What steps you have taken, or do you plan to take, to engage or consult (where applicable) the whole community or specific groups affected by this development or review? **This is a vital step.**

Steps you have taken, or plan to take, to engage or consult

Following Central Government intervention and appointment of Essex County Council to support Thurrock Council with its financial challenges, a series of savings proposals have been put forward including the proposal to introduce a new Contact Management Operating Model for financial year 24/25. This has been debated at public Overview & Scrutiny meeting on 28th November 2023.

Proposals, including this CEIA, will be published prior to a full Council meeting in March 2024.

Once approved, the Full Business Case will be implemented and a systems provider procured. Further engagement with staff and representative groups will take place at that time. Public surveys on the services provided by the Contact Centre took place in 2020 and again in January 2023. The 2023 survey asked users about the current Interactive Response System (IVR) and the responses showed that following improvements prompted by the 2020 survey there was an overall 14% improvement in the way customers were able to navigate their way through the automated system.

If an option was available, customers were asked why they did not choose the relevant option to speak to a trained advisor

Reason customer gave as to why they did not choose an option appropriate to their enquiry	Results	
	2020	2023
Distracted and/or just did not hear the option	31%	21%
Didn't know what to choose	28%	20%
Say they did press the right option	9%	7%
Missed what they wanted	6%	4%
Just wanted to talk to someone	4%	31%
Options not clear didn't hear what they wanted	22%	17%

The results of these surveys will be used during the design of the technical solution especially the learning around 'options' offered by the automated system.

Additionally, as part of the Council's commitment to monitor data and to respond to user's needs, an automatic survey is offered at the end of every call where users are encouraged to feedback on the way the call was handled and whether their issue was resolved to their satisfaction.

These surveys will be maintained and closely monitored under the new Operating Model so that the system can be continuously improved and better guidance can be given during the call and as part of a Frequently Asked Questions section on the Council's website.

- 1.2. What data or intelligence sources have you used to inform your assessment of the impact? How have these helped you understand who will be affected by the development or review?

Sources of data or intelligence, and how they have been used

Price Waterhouse Cooper (PWC) was engaged by the Council in the latter part of 2023 to carry out analysis that could be used to produce an Outline Business Case. PWC analysed 334 ways in which the public make contact with the council including 296 routes which go direct to service areas. It was found that multiple keying-in of data and incomplete details taken over email/ad hoc phone contacts led to further multiple contacts being required providing an inefficient process and a poor service for residents. Implementation of automatic processes and the ability for customers to self-serve will eliminate many of the failed contacts experienced by users.

Findings from the UK digital Poverty Alliance ([UK Digital Poverty Evidence Review 2022 Introduction - Digital Poverty Alliance](#)) have been considered to understand how digital poverty can still exist in a world seemingly full of smart mobile phones, computers and tablets, because of a lack of cheap and reliable connectivity. This is further supported by the Lloyds Bank 2023 Consumer Digital Index [231122-lloyds-consumer-digital-index-2023-report.pdf \(lloydsbank.com\)](#)

Data from the 2021 Census shows that the median age in Thurrock is slightly younger than the national average (age 36 and 40 respectively) which poses no particular challenges for the implementation of the operating model. There has been an increase of 16.5% of those aged between 50 and 64 years of age but this is not an age bracket of concern for digital literacy. Unemployment fell from 5% to 3.2% which should ease pressure on factors which traditionally lead to digital poverty.

2. Community and workforce impact

- 2.1. What impacts will this development or review have on communities, workforce and the health and wellbeing of local residents?

Communities and groups	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Summary of positive and negative impacts	How will positives be maximised, and negatives minimised or eliminated?
Local communities in general	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Voice automation is a technology that can understand, process and respond to human language - whether spoken or typed and is tried and tested across councils, and the wider public and private sector. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software allows processes to be streamlined and better management of relationships with residents throughout their entire interaction with the Council. The creation of portals, webforms and new automated workflows will bring council interaction into line with modern practices enabling residents to digitally self-serve and helping to ensure that things are done 'right first time' so that users are not asked to repeat basic details multiple times	Implementation of technologies will be rolled out in phases allowing lessons learned from early phases to be incorporated into subsequent phases thus engendering a continuous learning experience Additionally, the Council has a network of Libraries and Community Hubs where digital inclusion is supported through a series of initiatives to help people to get online, this includes free access to PCs and wifi.

Communities and groups	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Summary of positive and negative impacts	How will positives be maximised, and negatives minimised or eliminated?
Age	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Census 2021 predicts an increase of 16,000 people in the 65 years old or older age group living in Thurrock in the next ten years.</p> <p>Older users experiencing digital exclusion may experience difficulties interacting with new technology.</p>	<p>Existing options such as face-to-face services and support at Libraries and Community Hubs already in place for older members of the community will continue and wherever possible will be enhanced by the intelligent system which can repeat questions slowly and clearly. Also the releasing of resources from transactional contacts, which will be handled by the automated system, will allow greater direct support for vulnerable users. Further engagement with representative groups through implementation will help to identify potential barriers and suitable mitigation if required.</p>

Communities and groups	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Summary of positive and negative impacts	How will positives be maximised, and negatives minimised or eliminated?
Disability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>The 2021 Census shows that one in fourteen residents have a disability that limits their day to day activity a lot - equivalent to 7.2% of the population; one in ten has a disability that limit their day to day activity a little.</p> <p>Users with sensory disabilities may face difficulties accessing and interacting with new technology</p>	<p>Existing options in place for individuals with sensory disabilities (such as hearing loops, sign language video calls) will remain in place and wherever possible will be enhanced by the releasing of resources from transactional contacts, which will be handled by the automated system, thereby allowing greater direct support for disabled users. Further engagement with representative groups through implementation will help to identify potential barriers and suitable mitigation if required.</p>

Communities and groups	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Summary of positive and negative impacts	How will positives be maximised, and negatives minimised or eliminated?
Gender reassignment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, gender reassignment is defined as 'proposing to undergo, undergoing or having undergone a process to reassign your sex'. Census 2021 highlighted that 390 (or 0.3%) had a gender identity different from sex registered at birth but did not specify gender reassignment.</p> <p>There is no specific disproportionate impact based on gender reassignment identified from this project.</p>	There is no specific disproportionate impact based on gender reassignment identified from this project.
Marriage and civil partnership	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>The 2021 Census data showed a rise in the share of lone-parent households from 11.2% in 2011 to 13.5% in 2021. Thurrock is now among the highest 15% in England for lone-parents. However, there is no specific disproportionate impact according to marriage and civil partnership status identified from this project.</p>	There is no specific disproportionate impact according to marriage and civil partnership status identified from this project.
Pregnancy and maternity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	There is no specific disproportionate impact based on pregnancy and maternity identified from this project.	There is no specific disproportionate impact based on pregnancy and maternity identified from this project.

Communities and groups	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Summary of positive and negative impacts	How will positives be maximised, and negatives minimised or eliminated?
Race	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Thurrock's ethnic makeup has changed in the last ten years. <i>Other ethnic minorities</i> groups represented 14% in 2011 and increased to 34% in 2021</p> <p>78 languages are spoken in Thurrock with English, Romanian, Polish, Lithuanian being the most common ones.</p> <p>In 4,227 households no people have English as a main language.</p> <p>A further 1,657 have no English as a first language speaking adults in the household, but at least one person aged 3 to 15 years, has English as a main language</p> <p>Where English is not the users first language they may experience difficulties interacting with new technology.</p>	<p>Existing services such as translation and interpretation for those who do not have English as their first language will remain in place and wherever possible the service will be enhanced by the releasing of resources from transactional contacts, which will be handled by the automated system, thereby allowing greater direct support for those facing language barriers. Further engagement with representative groups through implementation will help to identify potential barriers and suitable mitigation if required.</p>

Communities and groups	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Summary of positive and negative impacts	How will positives be maximised, and negatives minimised or eliminated?
Religion or belief	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Approximately half of Thurrock residents identify as Christian in the 2021 Census. A third of the residents consider themselves to have no religion. Islam is the third largest religious group in Thurrock (one in twenty residents). There is no specific disproportionate impact based on religion or belief identified from this project.</p>	<p>There is no specific disproportionate impact based on religion or belief identified from this project.</p>
Sex	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Females form 51% of Thurrock's local population (of the 65+ age group, 13,000 are female and 10,800 are male).</p> <p>There is no specific disproportionate impact for individuals based on sex identified from this project</p>	<p>There is no specific disproportionate impact for individuals based on sex identified from this project.</p>
Sexual orientation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Nine in ten adult residents in Thurrock identify as Straight or Heterosexual; and one in fifty identify as Gay/Lesbian or Bisexual (2%)</p> <p>There is no specific disproportionate impact based on sexual orientation identified from this project</p>	<p>There is no specific disproportionate impact based on sexual orientation identified from this project</p>

Communities and groups	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Summary of positive and negative impacts	How will positives be maximised, and negatives minimised or eliminated?
Location-specific impact, if any	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	There is no specific disproportionate impact that is location specific identified from this project.	There is no specific disproportionate impact that is location specific identified from this project. The Council has a network of Libraries and Community Hubs where digital inclusion is supported through a series of initiatives to help people to get online, this includes free access to PCs and wifi,
Workforce	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	The implementation of automated technology will change the way staff are involved in contact management and may require re-training, service restructures and potential job losses as technology takes over.	<p>The roll out of all new technology will be preceded by training for all those that will be using the technology and will be maintained as part of a regular training programme.</p> <p>Restructures will follow HR policy and guidance and will also include training/re-skilling where needed.</p> <p>The diversity of staff affected will be considered in consultation with HR and workforce diversity data to mitigate disproportionate negative impact for any group through the restructure process.</p> <p>Job losses will follow the council's procedure and will include full staff/union engagement .</p>

Communities and groups	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Summary of positive and negative impacts	How will positives be maximised, and negatives minimised or eliminated?
Health and wellbeing of residents	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>The 2021 Census data showed that overall, most residents rate their health as good or very good (four in five), but one in twenty have a bad or a very bad health</p> <p>No specific disproportionate impact on health and wellbeing has been identified from this project.</p>	No specific disproportionate impact on health and wellbeing has been identified from this project.
Socio-economic outcomes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	No specific disproportionate impact on socio-economic outcomes has been identified from this project.	No specific disproportionate impact on socio-economic outcomes has been identified from this project, but further engagement with representative groups through implementation will help identify potential barriers and suitable mitigation if required.
Veterans and serving members of the armed forces	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	No specific disproportionate on veterans and serving members of the armed forces impact has been identified from this project.	No specific disproportionate impact on veterans and serving members of the armed forces has been identified from this project.

Communities and groups	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Summary of positive and negative impacts	How will positives be maximised, and negatives minimised or eliminated?
Unpaid carers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Approximately one in twelve residents provides an unpaid form of care (14,608 residents).</p> <p>An unpaid carer may look after, give help or support to anyone who has long-term physical or mental ill-health conditions, illness or problems related to old age (paid employment excluded), and the help can be within or outside of the carer's household.</p> <p>Unpaid carers may contact the Council on behalf of the person they are caring for but no specific disproportionate impact has been identified for unpaid carers from this project.</p>	No specific disproportionate impact for unpaid carers has been identified from this project but further engagement with representative groups through implementation will help to identify potential barriers and suitable mitigation if required.

3. Monitoring and review

- 3.1. How will you review community and equality impact once the policy, strategy, function or service has been implemented? These actions should be developed using the information gathered in sections 1 and 2 and included in your service area's business plans.

Action	By when	By who
Review comments/feedback given at Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet	February 2024	Project Team
Review comments/feedback given at Full Council	March 2024	Project Team

Review CEIA with procured supplier of systems and agree actions they will fulfil to ensure that we continue to maintain our Equality Act and Public Sector Equality Duty responsibilities.	April 2024	Project Team
Ongoing review of lessons learned from each early phase to carry forward to each subsequent phase	July 2024 onwards	Project Team
Automatic surveys to be offered to users at the end of every call and reviewed by the Assistant Director	Already in place – if necessary survey questions can be adapted to suit	Contact Centre
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Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.

4. Next steps

- 4.1. The information gathered must be used to inform reports presented to Cabinet or overview and scrutiny committees. This will give members a necessary understanding of the impact their decisions will have on different groups and the whole community.

Summarise the implications and customer impact below. This summary should be added to the committee reports template in the Diversity and Equality Implications section for review and sign-off at the consultation stage of the report preparation cycle.

Summary of implications and customer impact
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The Council currently has around 334 routes which the public use to make contact including 296 routes which go direct to service areas having received no triage from the Contact Centre. Direct and ad-hoc contacts often have incomplete details and require the re-keying of data multiple times giving rise to an inefficient process and a poor service for residents. Implementation of automatic processes and the ability for customers to self-serve will eliminate many of the failed contacts experienced by users and will support the Council to 'get it right first time'.

Voice automation is a technology that can understand, process and respond to human language - whether spoken or typed and is tried and tested across councils, and the wider public and private sector. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software allows processes to be streamlined and better management of relationships with residents throughout their entire interaction with the Council. The creation of portals, webforms and new automated workflows will bring council interaction into line with modern practices enabling residents to digitally self-serve.

As existing specialist services (language translation, video sign call etc) will remain in use, and call handling assistants will be in place behind every contact should they be needed, this project minimises any disadvantages for vulnerable groups whilst providing the council with an opportunity to greatly enhance contact management so that information only needs to be provided once, contacts can be dealt with correctly first time, and efficiencies can be brought to the service leading to fewer call failures. Regular monitoring and review is already embedded in the service showing a high caller satisfaction rate of 98%. This will form the benchmark for future services which will continue to be monitored in the same way.

Behind the automated system, traditional call handlers will be in place ready to take over and handle the more complex calls. Facilities in libraries and Hubs will continue to provide support in the community.

The Council's equalities obligations will form part of the specification sent out to potential providers during procurement of the Voice Automation and CRM systems and will form part of the evaluation process.

5. Sign off

5.1. This Community Equality Impact Assessment must be authorised by the relevant project sponsor, strategic lead, or assistant director. This should not be the CEIA Lead Officer. Officers authorising this assessment are responsible for:

- the accuracy of the information
- making sure actions are undertaken

Name	Role	Date
Pete Pawson	Interim Change Director	29/02/2024
Tracie Heiser	Assistant Director Customer Services	29/02/2024
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