

Appendix C

# Harlow Council

## Customer Service

### Review

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## 1. Executive Summary

This report has been produced by Foresight Consulting (UK) Limited in conjunction with Harlow Council following a request for an independent consultancy to undertake a Customer Service Review.

### Objectives

The timing and reasoning behind commissioning the review includes:

- The previous 2012-14 Action Plan has been largely completed and there is a need to ensure that the development is maintained.
- A Scrutiny review last year looked into the twin issues of lost calls and complaints; whilst a short term fix was implemented to recruit more staff, longer term staffing levels clearly need to reduce.
- A programme to undertake the future development of Contact Harlow and how this can be achieved.
- To ensure that there is a joined up approach between the whole council to deliver excellent customer service in a way that encompasses technology and customer needs.

### The Review

The report begins by summarising the development of customer service and access at Harlow Council over the last five years to:

- Chart the considerable progress made already.
- To illustrate the rapid pace of change in customer behaviour.
- To illustrate the increasing demand for online services from Harlow customers.

Next, we review and comment on the current operation, before setting out the latest thinking on:

- How customer demand is likely to change over the next 3 years.
- What this means for Harlow Council's vision for customer access.

We then re-visit the question of customer access and the current operation, and come to a number of conclusions:

- Greater engagement and consultation with customers is required to better understand their needs.
- Any closure of the cash office needs to be carefully planned and handled sensitively.
- Whole systems thinking is limited and the implications of initiatives and responses to perceived problems is not always thought through; leading to unintended consequences.
- Development of the self service capability needs to be accelerated.
- An associated Action Plan is created and monitored by a newly created the Customer Services Board to drive forward projects and change arising from this review.

### **Investment and Savings**

Throughout this document there are various investment and savings suggested. These are all interdependent on the actions being undertaken and as such they are subject to change. Assuming that they are all undertaken, it is estimated that with the required investment, there will be savings in the region of £125k over the lifetime of this report.

## 2. Scope, Method, Assumptions and Exclusions

This report presents the findings of a Customer Service Review and Access Strategy undertaken by Foresight Consulting (UK) Limited. The consultants deployed on this engagement have substantial experience of reviewing other borough/district/city Customer Service operations, as well as the ICT operations that support them.

A mixture of face-to-face interviews, observations, telephone calls/conferencing, desk research and reviewing existing documentation and reports were used to inform the findings and recommendations.

The scope was confirmed following submission of a proposal, and a subsequent meeting with the Head of Community Wellbeing, Head of Housing and Head of Finance for Harlow Council.

The methodology used for this engagement was:

- A visual review of Harlow Council's use of the Firmstep Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) known as AchieveService, telephony, back office systems, web sites and social media, i.e. Facebook and Twitter.
- Meetings with key Harlow Council contacts and examination of relevant documents to gather further information, current thinking and expertise around channel migration and operational improvements.
- Off-site analysis – comparison against our bank of existing knowledge (e.g. call/contact centre stats, CRM costs, other performance metrics), investigation and research
- Follow-up telephone calls and emails to clarify any points that were still unclear.

## 3. Background

The timing and reasoning behind commissioning the review includes:

- The previous 2012-14 Action Plan has been largely completed and there is a need to ensure that the development is maintained.
- A previous Scrutiny review looked into the twin issues of lost calls and complaints.
- A programme to undertake the future development of Contact Harlow.
- To ensure that there is a joined up approach between the whole council to deliver excellent customer service.

Contact Harlow has been in operation since September 2001 and has moved from providing basic information on just a few service areas to in depth information for all Harlow Council services.

Below is a timeline of developments and key milestones in customer service and access since 2011:

## **2011**

- Achieve Service was first implemented, replacing the old HCRM system with a more customer-focused and user-friendly system. It also delivered substantial cost savings in terms of both on-going maintenance and usability. Harlow Council was one of the first council's to deploy the system and now is frequently used as a reference site by others.
- Integration of the switchboard into main phone system.

## **2012**

- Customer Services Strategy produced and targets largely achieved.
- New website development started late 2012.
- Links with Veolia (Waste Management) provided end-to-end reporting on missed bins. Except for having to go back to get the bin, no user input is now required (if reported online).
- A terminal placed in the reception area to promote self-service facilities.
- Bidding for homes made online only.

## **2013**

- Website re-launch completed early 2013 saving £18,900 per annum. Reduction of webpages from 3,891 (11/03/2015) down to around 500 at re-launch to the benefit of all.
- New website more resilient – now externally hosted and can be edited outside of corporate network. New important breaking news banner can be published on every page quickly to alert customers.
- Missed bins application launched within website. Bin widget lookup launched within self-service to enable customers to look up their collection dates before making a report for missed bin.
- Development completed for online bookings of green waste, bulky waste and fridges.
- Advertising screens erected in Contact Centre waiting area.
- Significant work undertaken with housing to improve housing registration; the majority of initial assessments are now on-line.
- Review completed of major demand streams - improving payments and end-to-end processes.
- Provided comprehensive information for customers on how to self-serve and access services (both Harlow Council and other relevant services) during Christmas shutdown – online and in Harlow Times.

## **2014**

- Development of more things to do 'online'.
- Staff increased in Contact Harlow improving lost call rate from above 35% to around 5% - see note below.
- Infonet developed with internal phone directory, which has demonstrated significant internal user satisfaction based on staff survey results.
- Advertising campaigns for self-service in Harlow Times and local media.
- New signage in Contact Harlow including 'A Boards'.
- All webpages with no visits are reviewed with pages no longer of value removed.

Note: The reduced levels of performance resulted from a combination of a large increase in customer contact (due to the Modern Homes programme) at a time when Contact Harlow had reduced staffing levels. Extra funding was then obtained from both the General Funding and

Housing Revenue Account (HRA) to successfully increase the staffing levels in line with demand.

## 2015

- Website refreshed and made 'mobile friendly'.
- Obtained 'blue tick' on Twitter. Over 7k followers. Increase from 5k in just over a year. Similarly, rapid Facebook growth from just over 100 to 1.6k likes (friends).
- Common user interaction – information and requests for service.
- Website achieved most visits in one day on 8/5/2015 with 9,397 visits.
- Webcasts of main Council public meetings.
- Corporate email signature rolled out – promoting Facebook, Twitter and Website.

## 2016

- New features of Social Media explored including Periscope and Instagram.
- Followers increased to 8.3k on Twitter, from 7K in 2015.
- Interactive elements of website significantly increased including new forms, refuse and election data.

### 3.1 Changes in Customer Behaviour

Recently published research has shown a very significant growth in demand by customers for self-service and communication via e-channels.

For example The Office for National Statistics survey for Internet Access – Households and Individuals, 2014 found that:

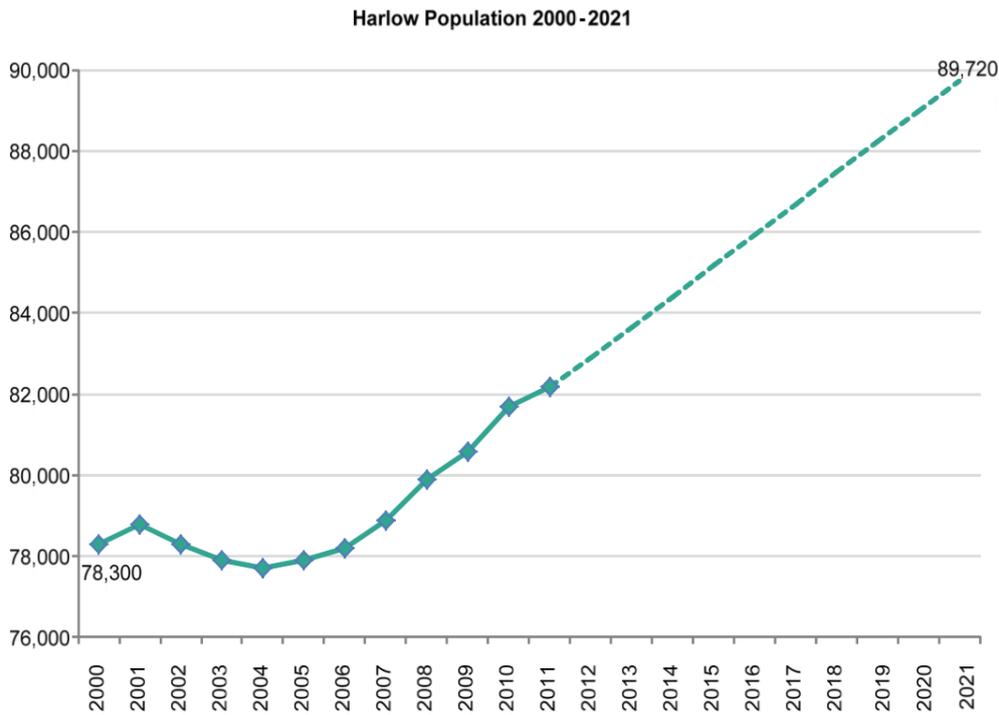
- In 2014, 38 million adults (76%) in Great Britain accessed the Internet every day, 21 million more than in 2006, when directly comparable records began.
- Access to the Internet using a mobile phone more than doubled between 2010 and 2014, from 24% to 58%.
- In 2014, 74% of all adults bought goods or services online, up from 53% in 2008. Clothes (49%) were the most popular online purchase in 2014.
- Of all adults in Great Britain, 67% are aware of Internet storage space services, but the take up of these services to store data is much lower at 35%.
- In Great Britain, 22 million households (84%) had Internet access in 2014, up from 57% in 2006.
- Fixed broadband Internet connections were used by 91% of households.

Use of a computer is inextricably linked to the ability of an individual to use the Internet. In 2014, 73% of adults in Great Britain used a computer every day, up from 45% in 2006. Increases in daily computer usage between 2006 and 2014 were seen for all age groups, with the largest relative increase being for those aged 65 and over. In 2006, of those aged 65 and over, just 9% reported that they used a computer every day, compared with 42% in 2014.

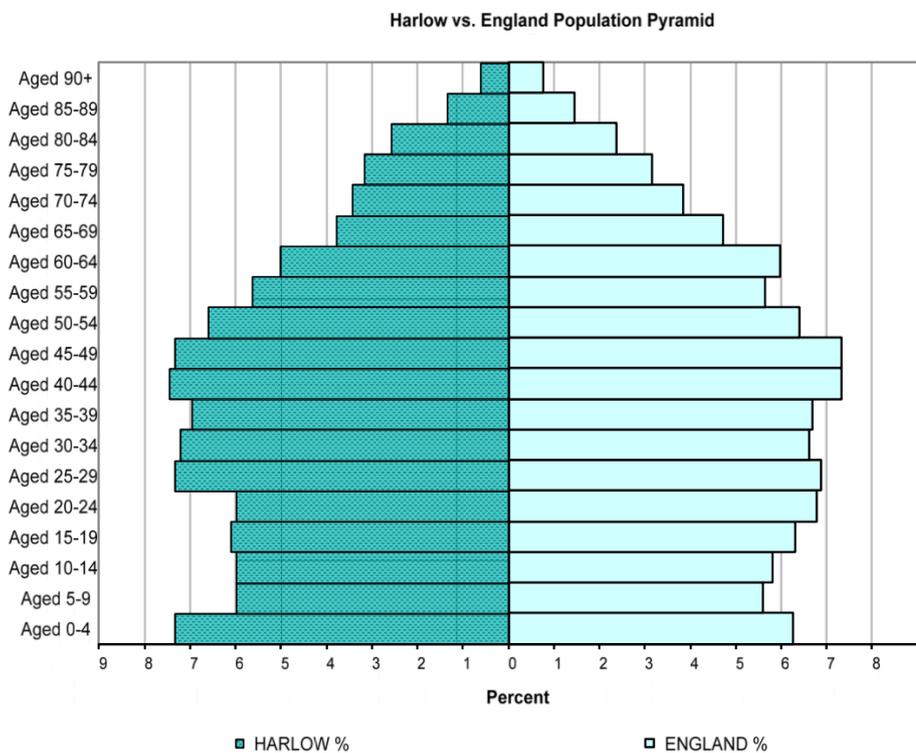
### 3.2 Population Changes

The June 2013 Harlow Population Profile includes some key statistics:

3.2.1 The population of Harlow is set to grow significantly – see chart below.



3.2.2 Harlow has a high percentage of young people aged 0 to 15



The

Ofcom Adults' Media Use and Attitudes Report for 2015, includes some interesting statistics about use of public or civic services online:

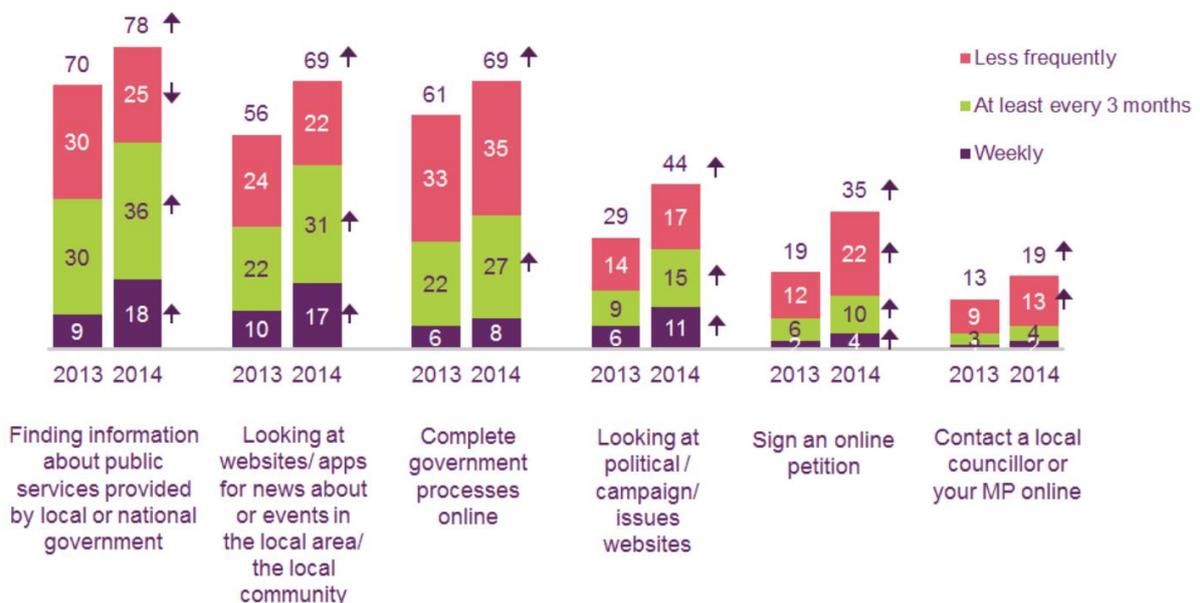
### 3.2.3 By social demographic (see **Appendix A** for an explanation) groups and by sex

All internet users		AB	C1	C2	DE	Male	Female
<b>Base</b>	<b>1609</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>497</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>394</b>	<b>791</b>	<b>818</b>
Finding information about public services provided by local or national government	78%	90% ↑	80%	71% ↓	67% ↓	79%	77%
Looking at websites/ apps for news about or events in the local area/ the local community	69%	84% ↑	71%	61% ↓	57% ↓	70%	69%
Complete government processes online	69%	84% ↑	74% ↑	59% ↓	51% ↓	73% ↑	65%
Looking at political / campaign/ issues websites	44%	58% ↑	49%	31% ↓	28% ↓	51% ↑	37%
Sign an online petition	35%	48% ↑	38%	27% ↓	24% ↓	37%	34%
Contact a local councillor or your MP online	19%	31% ↑	15%	11% ↓	14%	23% ↑	15%

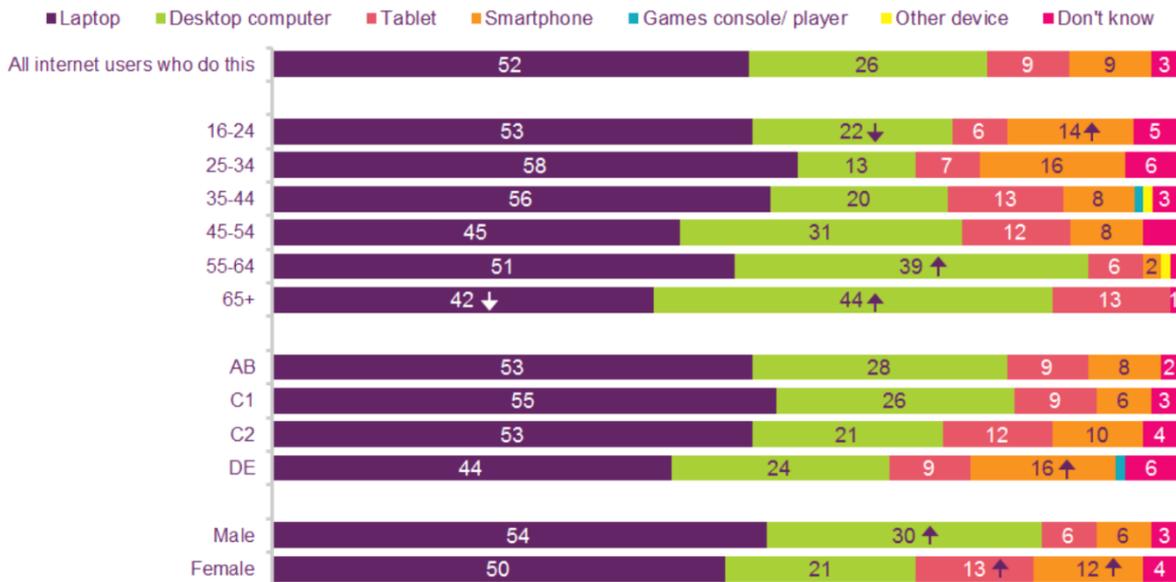
### 3.2.4 By age

All internet users		16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
<b>Base</b>	<b>1609</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>319</b>	<b>265</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>130</b>
Finding information about public services provided by local or national government	78%	69% ↓	83%	88% ↑	81%	70% ↓	71%	58% ↓
Looking at websites/ apps for news about or events in the local area/ the local community	69%	63%	73%	77% ↑	73%	66%	59% ↓	51% ↓
Complete government processes online	69%	51% ↓	77% ↑	80% ↑	70%	66%	58% ↓	45% ↓
Looking at political / campaign/ issues websites	44%	40%	50%	51% ↑	44%	36%	27% ↓	29% ↓
Sign an online petition	35%	35%	42%	40%	34%	30%	27% ↓	13% ↓
Contact a local councillor or your MP online	19%	12% ↓	15%	23%	19%	21%	21%	15%

### 3.2.5 By frequency of use



### 3.2.6 By device most used



The proportion of adults citing smartphone use (66%) has not increased to a statistically significant level since 2013 (62%). However, almost all of these people (61% of adults) use a smartphone to go online at home, and most (51% of adults) do so outside of the home. This is the only device used to go online in both locations by a majority of adults. The tablet has continued to increase as a device used to access the Internet (39% vs. 30% in 2013) and this trend is likely to significantly increase.

Despite this, alternative devices tend to supplement rather than substitute computer use, with just 6% only using other devices to go online at home or elsewhere.

### 3.3 The increasing demand for online services from Harlow customers

The two tables below further illustrate the increase in demand for online services from 2010 to 2015.

Channel	2010	2015
Face to face customers	Circa 23,000	17,781 General 104,297 Cash Office
Telephone callers	Circa 155,000 (c23,000 of which are lost)	132,688
Website visitors	349,597	415,527
Email enquiries	Estimated doubling in volumes between 2010-2015	

Online Self Service	March 2015	March 2016
	680	1053

Some examples of the growth (from March 2015 to March 2016) in the use of the online services include:

- Bulky collections – up from 102 to 226
- Green waste collections – up from 41 to 56

Year	Visits to <a href="http://www.harlow.gov.uk">www.harlow.gov.uk</a>
2010/11	349,597
2011/12	350,297
2012/13	379,166
2013/14	336,048 – see note below
2014/15	415,527
2015/16	521,120

There are several possible reasons why the unique visitor figures for 2013/14 took a dip after the re-launch of the main Harlow website.

The website was fundamentally redesigned including the look, navigation and structure reducing from nearly 4,000 pages to around 500 at re-launch. All but around five addresses of the 500 pages were changed. This change meant it took time for web visitors to become familiar with the navigation, find content they had possibly saved in their favourites or had referenced on old printed leaflets or on external websites etc.

Most links to the Harlow Council website from other websites were broken upon launch due the URL changes. With so many external websites using old URLs linking to the Harlow Council website it took time to identify and request changes from each external source.

After the re-launch the Council did not heavily promote the website and it was not until end of 2014 that the website and self-serve were promoted within the Civic Centre, through social media and in traditional publications.

The table below shows a snapshot of statistics for those services that are available online for customers to use. It demonstrates that in March 2016, over 32% of enquiries were done by customers themselves using the website compared to those that contacted Contact Harlow.

March 2016	Total	Customer Initiated	Contact Harlow Initiated	Percentage Customer Initiated
Abandon Vehicle Claim form	22	0	22	0%
Abandon Vehicle	99	61	38	62%
Allotment Application	16	16	0	100%
Anti-Social Behaviour	83	10	73	12%
ASB Case Review	0	0	0	0%
Broken Glass	11	1	10	9%
Bulky Collection	616	226	390	37%
Careline Enquiry form	1	1	0	100%
Container Request	206	65	141	32%
Council Tax - Change of address	112	85	27	76%
Council Tax - Disability Discount Claim form	0	0	0	0%
Council Tax - Discount Claim form	28	28	0	100%
Council Tax - Discount Review form	3	3	0	100%
Council Tax - Property Exemption form	2	2	0	100%
Damaged Street Bin	2	1	1	50%
Dead Animal on Public Land Report	8	2	6	25%
Dog Fouling	25	6	19	24%
Dumped Rubbish/HMS Cleaning	590	50	540	8%
Ecco reuse	10	10	0	100%
Fly Posting	0	0	0	0%
Garage Application	127	65	62	51%
Graffiti	6	1	5	17%
Green Waste bagged	258	56	202	22%
Green Waste Premium	349	137	212	39%
Harlow Market Application to Trade	3	3	0	100%
Harlow Market Event Application form	0	0	0	0%
Hate Crime	0	0	0	0%
Housing Initial Assessment	326	160	166	49%
Litter	56	11	45	20%
Missed Bin	156	32	124	21%
Noise	45	12	33	27%
Overflowing Street Bin	17	0	17	0%
Pest Control	33	7	26	21%
Stray, lost, found dog or cat	3	2	1	67%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3213</b>	<b>1053</b>	<b>2160</b>	<b>32.77%</b>

## 4. Review of current Customer Service & Access

### 4.1 Overview

This section takes an overview of the current operation - customer service and access, drawing together common themes and points raised by those interviewed and from direct observations.

It is the view of Foresight Consulting that Contact Harlow is broadly fit for purpose, and like most councils has a mixture of things that work well and things that could be improved to revitalise the service.

### 4.2 Face to face service

The following points were informed by the direct experiences of the two consultants. This was achieved by locating themselves in the ground floor area, observing the operation and speaking with staff and customers about their needs and experiences:

- All customer service staff were very courteous and helpful to everyone who arrived at the desk and they displayed a high level of customer service.
- The two public entrances mean that customers can arrive at the reception desk from different directions. Staff said this can sometimes confuse customers although steps have been taken to try and mitigate this wherever possible.
- The ticketing system for booths works well. Customers are advised of the likely waiting time and can make an informed choice about whether to stay or return later. The loudspeaker system works well.
- The greeting and re-direction of “business to business” callers to the soft furnished waiting area works well.
- The self-service PCs are tucked away at the side of main reception and they are located there because of limited power sockets and network points in the reception area. There are floor standing signs directing customers to the PC plus displays on the plasma screens promoting their location.
- There are six customer advisor booths for face to face transactions. The booths are quite shallow in depth and at times can be noisy. They don’t appear to be as private as they could be.
- There are seven interview rooms operated by a booking system.
- During all visits carried out by Foresight Consulting, they noticed that many customers waiting to be seen were tapping on a smart phone. There is currently no public Wi-Fi available in reception.
- At first sight the area (particularly the main reception desk) looks wasteful of space although on Monday mornings the space is fully utilised by customers queuing for the cash desk.
- The current layout has the potential to be re-designed to actively persuade and encourage customers to use other channels and reduce demand for face to face transactions.

### 4.3 Cash Office

The cash office is by far the biggest draw of customers into the Civic Centre.

As well as making payments, customers often then undertake other transaction such as booking bulky waste collections.

The breakdown of payments into the cash office is shown below:

Cash office payments 01/04/2015 to 31/3/2016	Cash Amount	Cheque Amount	Credit Card Amount	Debit Card Amount
Value	£6,465,242 (53.82%)	£2,091,277 (17.41%)	£103,082 (0.86%)	£3,352,016 (27.91%)
Transactions	67,105 (68.99%)	9,958 (10.24%)	1,032 (1.06%)	19,171 (19.71%)

It is worth noting that many Councils and Housing Associations have stopped taking cash in their offices, promoting instead Direct Debit payments, standing orders, internet payment, payment by automated phone system and PayPoint/AllPay. Harlow Council heavily promotes alternative methods but continues to take cash payments.

Within Essex, only Epping Forest DC still promote cash payments directly. Three have payment machines only and the rest having no advertised facilities to take payments directly, instead directing customers to internet payments.

Some staff suggest that the customer contact generated by the cash office provides the opportunity to identify other emerging needs or issues, which if left unaddressed may develop into more serious problems. Others understand that with the level of savings that the Council needs to find, a planned reduction (of opening times / reduction of resources), along with closure of the cash office when the time is right might have less impact than other service cuts.

The below table shows the number of online-transactions undertaken in late December 2015 / early 2016, when the offices were, i) open and, ii) closed. It is interesting to note the significant increase in online transactions when the offices are closed, even though the period included both Christmas day and Boxing Day. It raises the question about why people choose to visit the Council, when they have used electronic channels previously.

Contact Harlow Open	15/12/15	16/12/15	17/12/15	18/12/15	19/12/15	20/12/15	21/12/15	22/12/15	23/12/15	24/12/15	Totals
Web visits	1,252	1,320	1,289	1,073	811	910	1,347	2,723	2,040	1,088	<b>13,853</b>
Internet Payments	66	66	68	150	75	46	98	84	110	88	<b>851</b>
Auto Telephone payments	153	144	180	371	170	101	284	215	238	297	<b>2153</b>
Self Serve	21	30	18	24	14	18	29	23	24	13	<b>214</b>

Contact Harlow Closed	25/12/15	26/12/15	27/12/15	28/12/15	29/12/15	30/12/15	31/12/15	01/01/16	02/01/16	03/01/16	Totals
Web visits	480	872	1,475	2,456	2,614	2,216	1,150	1,421	1,661	2,226	<b>16,971</b>
Internet Payments	33	37	58	102	128	110	169	123	160	128	<b>1048</b>
Auto Telephone payments	34	87	108	194	237	162	339	179	218	192	<b>1750</b>
Self Serve	5	13	30	51	41	42	38	40	55	71	<b>386</b>

Many of those queuing are using a smartphone whilst they wait whilst others are using a credit or debit card to pay. Both of these groups could therefore pay via the Internet or the automated phone system (IVR). The experience of other local authorities is that many people come to the cash office out of habit (e.g. they always shop that day so pop in to the Civic Centre as just another chore) or out of distrust of other electronic ways of paying (something that can generally be addressed through customer education or improving the electronic payment service provided). Certainly when the Council is closed the number of self-service transactions increase significantly, suggesting that some customers just have a preference to visit, rather than a need.

#### **4.4 Telephone – Call Centre**

The following points were noted during visits to the call centre:

- The operation overall appears to work well, is adequately resourced, with well-trained and motivated staff able to respond to customers calls.
- Work has been undertaken to ensure that resources are matched to demand. The staffing levels and general resource management – in other words whether the operation is run efficiently, has had an increase in resources after a period of particularly poor performance. This improved the lost call rate from over 35% to around 5%.
- There was sufficient resilience in the number of customer advisors to both accommodate peaks and troughs in individual service demands, lunch breaks and sickness.

#### **4.5 Self Service – Website and Social Media**

The following points were noted from speaking with staff involved in the maintenance of the main council website (and other local authorities – where Foresight Consulting has undertaken similar engagements) and reviewing the various sites.

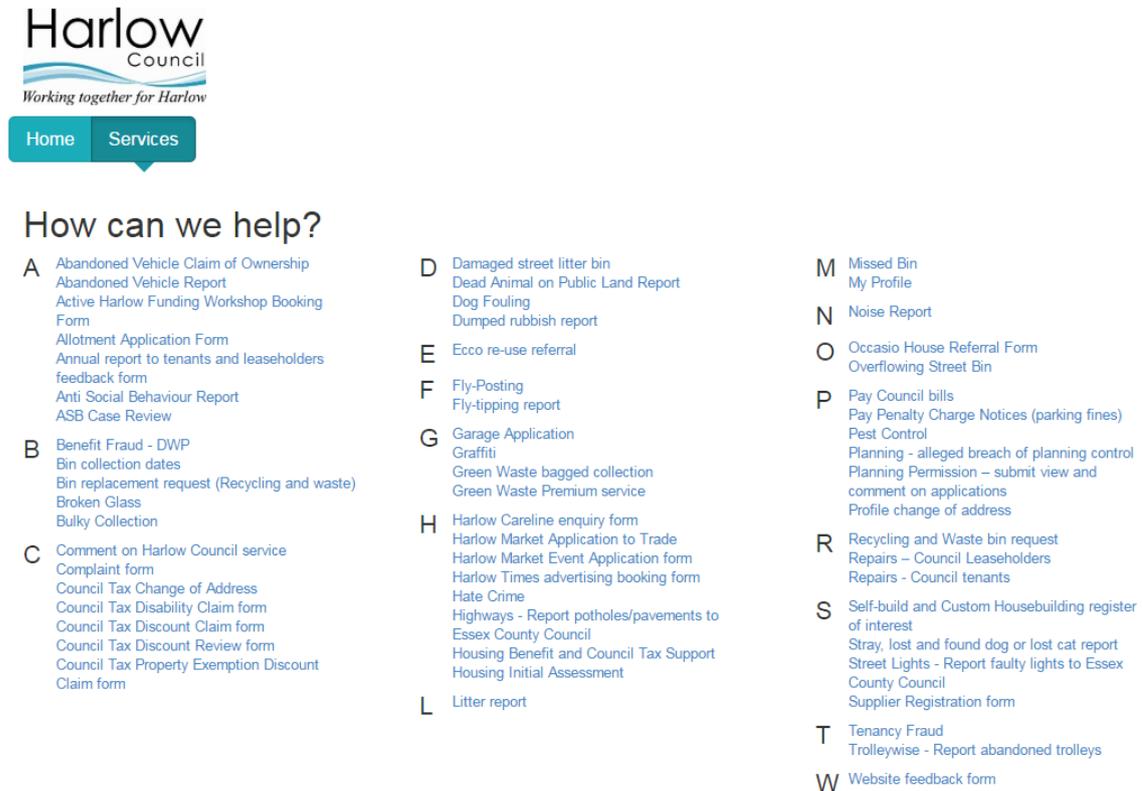
The choice of using Firmstep for both the Council's CRM and for the main website hosting was a good one, albeit that there were some initial teething problems and some outages of service. Firmstep has been chosen by many borough, district and city councils, and so investment in its development is significant and there is a body of shared resources which councils happily exchange.

Hosting the Council's main website externally is a major advantage should there be a local problem, e.g. major power outage, internet connection to the Council is cut/fails etc. Someone with a laptop (phone or tablet) and internet access can normally relocate themselves at home, or somewhere with a Wi-Fi connection and power, and update the website and social media with progress updates and helpful information.

Both the main council website and social media (e.g. Twitter and Facebook) are very focused around promoting the Council's self-service capability and encouraging channel shift.

Some of the other websites that Harlow Council is responsible for require an update.

The self-service capability of the main council website is well advanced with many e-forms available to both customer advisors and more importantly customers. This grows on a monthly basis. See below for an example:



The screenshot shows the Harlow Council website interface. At the top left is the Harlow Council logo with the tagline "Working together for Harlow". Below the logo are two navigation buttons: "Home" and "Services". The main heading is "How can we help?". Below this heading is a list of services organized into three columns, each starting with a letter (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, L, M, N, O, P, R, S, T, W).

**A** Abandoned Vehicle Claim of Ownership  
Abandoned Vehicle Report  
Active Harlow Funding Workshop Booking Form  
Allotment Application Form  
Annual report to tenants and leaseholders feedback form  
Anti Social Behaviour Report  
ASB Case Review

**B** Benefit Fraud - DWP  
Bin collection dates  
Bin replacement request (Recycling and waste)  
Broken Glass  
Bulky Collection

**C** Comment on Harlow Council service  
Complaint form  
Council Tax Change of Address  
Council Tax Disability Claim form  
Council Tax Discount Claim form  
Council Tax Discount Review form  
Council Tax Property Exemption Discount Claim form

**D** Damaged street litter bin  
Dead Animal on Public Land Report  
Dog Fouling  
Dumped rubbish report

**E** Ecco re-use referral

**F** Fly-Posting  
Fly-tipping report

**G** Garage Application  
Graffiti  
Green Waste bagged collection  
Green Waste Premium service

**H** Harlow Careline enquiry form  
Harlow Market Application to Trade  
Harlow Market Event Application form  
Harlow Times advertising booking form  
Hate Crime  
Highways - Report potholes/pavements to Essex County Council  
Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support  
Housing Initial Assessment

**L** Litter report

**M** Missed Bin  
My Profile

**N** Noise Report

**O** Occasio House Referral Form  
Overflowing Street Bin

**P** Pay Council bills  
Pay Penalty Charge Notices (parking fines)  
Pest Control  
Planning - alleged breach of planning control  
Planning Permission – submit view and comment on applications  
Profile change of address

**R** Recycling and Waste bin request  
Repairs – Council Leaseholders  
Repairs - Council tenants

**S** Self-build and Custom Housebuilding register of interest  
Stray, lost and found dog or lost cat report  
Street Lights - Report faulty lights to Essex County Council  
Supplier Registration form

**T** Tenancy Fraud  
Trolleywise - Report abandoned trolleys

**W** Website feedback form

The Council's investment in developing Social Media has been very successful, with over 8k Twitter followers – an increase from 5k in just over a year. Facebook has similarly grown from around a 100 to over 2.5k likes (friends).

## 4.6 Systems Thinking and Complaints

In simple terms, whole systems thinking is an approach to ensure that all factors are taken into account and the impact they have. For example you could have a fully staffed and helpful contact centre but if they are unable to resolve enquiries due to lack of IT or back office blockages then this is not going to fully resolve enquires.

Whilst there is evidence that the Contact Harlow service has continued to evolve, e.g. the promotion of online information and services, there is also evidence of actions or decisions being taken which are creating unintended consequences or which need addressing.

For example:

- In an edition of Harlow Times last year, there was a tear-out coupon allowing customers to come into the Council to pick up 10 free recycling sacks. Whilst clearly recycling is a good cause to be promoting, the influx of customers coming into the Civic Centre over the week is not helpful either to customer services staff or to those customers who have real needs that require them to visit. A better outcome may have been possible by exploring whether local supermarkets (or other such contact points) might undertake the service on behalf of the Council.
- Customer service staff often stop promoting the website to customers when they are busiest, e.g. when the queue is long at the cash office. Conversely, this is often the best time to promote self-service and to collect customer e-contact details such as email addresses and mobile phone numbers, as customers will be most receptive to not having to wait a long time in the future.
- Now that customers are not given rent cards with balances on, customers often cannot produce their rent account number which requires the cashiers to look up. Customers also increasingly ask cashiers for their balance as this previously was on their rent card.
- Similarly, allowing customers to visit the Civic Centre and to speak with a Customer Advisor on-demand, with only a relatively short wait time, discourages customers (many who may actually find it more convenient) from using self-service.

Complaints provide another useful source of information on what potentially is going wrong, particularly repeat incidents. The two tables on complaint volumes and validity (1.4.15 to 31.3.16) illustrate the opportunities for learning and improvement.

They also highlight the fact that although 52.84% of complaints were not upheld, it does mean that 47.16% of complaints received were either upheld or partially upheld and this gives the Council a target to improve on.

### Complaints – Volume by stage

Stage One	Stage Two	Stage Three	Total
723	128	48	899

### Complaints – Validity

Upheld	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld
271 (30.14%)	475 (52.84%)	153 (17.02%)

The Council is set to publish an annual report on complaints – numbers and types received. As well as leading to greater transparency with customers, this information will lead to opportunities to improve through whole systems thinking.

#### **4.7 Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Support**

There were several points made to Foresight Consulting in response to conversations with ICT, Contact Harlow staff and other key users.

Harlow Council now has an ICT Strategy Board and ICT Operation Board which means that decision making is more joined up. It is however recommended that future procurements of business application systems support the new customer services model and the wider organisational needs (as well as the services' needs), thereby reducing training demands in Customer Services and making systems integration easier.

Failure to include Customer Services in the procurement process, as new back office systems are procured, has the potential to create problems. For example, there can be a tendency for services, on the one hand to be attracted to new back office systems, which provide some elements of service-related self-service functionality, whereas they really need to recognise that this functionality should be provided centrally otherwise:

- Self-service silos will be created.
- Customers will probably need different sign-on details for each service.
- Customers may experience a different look and feel within each self-service area.
- The creation of a single view – 'My Harlow' – is then even more difficult to achieve.

The Council only has a single Internet connection (with the exception of the Wi-Fi connection used for Members) into the Council, a second connection is planned. At the moment there is a single point of failure for Firmstep (and Contact Harlow) should there be any problems with it. It is also understood that should there be an invocation of the Business Continuity Plan, Contact Harlow would relocate to another council office and the telephony redirected so that calls could be received and issues resolved at this secondary site.

#### **4.8 Relationship with the rest of the Council**

The relationship between Customer Services and the rest of the Council appears to vary service to service.

A revitalisation of regular front and back office meetings and engagement that initially took place should lead to a better understanding between the two groups.

## 4.9 Costs

It is generally very difficult to make comparisons with other councils for a wide number of reasons which include differing:

- Demands of their customer base and their needs.
- The variety of services that are offered – both in range and depth.
- Opening times and resources deployed, impacting on demand.
- Variations in salary costs and job roles.
- Definitions of a transaction. Is a unique visit, e.g. looking at information a transaction, or is a transaction only when something more substantial is done – pay, book, report, apply etc.

The two main sources of research that are commonly used in comparing costs are by Deloitte and Socitm. The following table uses a cost per visit measure for the three main channels of access using the averages across both pieces of research. It is by no means a definitive measure but does give a general idea on costs.

The cash office, due to the lack of comparable data, is discussed separately elsewhere. However, the actual costs of the cash office are made up of, i) staff costs (in the region of £50k per annum), ii) reduced / eliminating security fees, iii) a proportion of the Duty Manager's time etc.

Harlow	Customer Transactions (per year)	Cost per transaction (average of Deloitte & Socitm)	Total Cost
Face to face	17,781 (3.2%)	£11.44	£203,415 (31.7%)
Telephone	132,688 (23.4%)	£2.30	£305,182 (47.6%)
Website	415,527 (73.4%)	32p	£132,969 (20.7%)
Total	565,996		£641,566
Average cost per transaction			£1.13

For the purposes of comparison at a broader level, figures from other councils that Foresight Consulting have reviewed are set out below.

Oxford City Council's definition of a website transaction was when something more substantial was done; the others were based on unique visits.

Ipswich BC	Customer Transactions	Cost per transaction (average of Deloitte & Socitm)	Total Cost
Face to face	42,000 (5.5%)	£11.44	£480,480 (42.1%)
Telephone	216,000 (28.1%)	£2.30	£496,800 (43.6%)
Website	510,000 (66.4%)	32p	£163,200 (14.3%)
Total	768,000		£1,140,480
Average cost per transaction			£1.49

Oxford City Council	Customer Transactions	Cost per transaction (average of Deloitte & Socitm)	Total Cost
Face to face	14,196 (4.0%)	£11.44	£162,402 (20.8%)
Telephone	257,478 (73.4%)	£2.30	£592,199 (75.9%)
Website	79,357 (22.6%)	32p	£25,394 (3.3%)
Total	351,031		£779,995
Average cost per transaction			£2.22

South Kesteven	Customer Transactions	Cost per transaction (average of Deloitte & Socitm)	Total Cost
Face to face	28,781 (4.6%)	£11.44	£329,254 (37.0%)
Telephone	187,270 (30.0%)	£2.30	£430,271 (48.3%)
Website	408,648 (65.4%)	32p	£130,767 (14.7%)
Total	624,699		£890,292
Average cost per transaction			£1.43

The tables do show the disparity between the cost of providing a face-to-face service and the relatively small number of transactions with the costs of providing the website (and the much higher number of transactions).

The Council has a high percentage of transactions through the website compared to the others and the more transactions that are web enabled, the lower the likely cost will become in other areas.

Based on the figures in the above tables, it does show that Harlow Council has an average cost per transaction of £1.13 which does make it more cost effective than the others.

#### 4.10 The potential for realising savings

There is an opportunity to realise savings through both improving whole systems thinking and channel migration.

Taking whole system thinking first, there are three key aspects:

- By reducing failure demand – when people, structure, process or systems fails to deliver what they are supposed to, either inherently by design or by simply failing. Addressing complaints in a timely manner will also have an impact up failure demand
- By process optimisation – by improving the way services are delivered.
- By rethinking services – addressing the root cause rather than symptoms, by joined up (multi-agency) thinking etc.

The following three tables demonstrate the cost savings that could be achieved should there be a channel shift from traditional methods of interaction to more web based. The figures used are those presented in the previous section as a baseline and show a 5, 10 and 25% shift respectively.

<b>5% Channel Shift</b>				
<b>2019/20</b>	<b>Customer Visits</b>	<b>Cost per visit (average of Deloitte &amp; Socitm)</b>	<b>Total cost</b>	<b>Change £</b>
Face to face	16,892 General (3.0%)	£11.44	£193,244	£10,171 Saving
Telephone	126,054 (22.3%)	£2.30	£289,923	£15,259 Saving
Website	423,050 (74.7%)	32p	£135,376	£2,408 Cost
<b>Total potential savings =</b>				<b>£23,022 Saving</b>

<b>10% Channel Shift</b>				
<b>2019/20</b>	<b>Customer Visits</b>	<b>Cost per visit (average of Deloitte &amp; Socitm)</b>	<b>Total cost</b>	<b>Change £</b>
Face to face	16,003 (2.8%)	£11.44	£183,073	£20,341 Saving
Telephone	119,419 (21.1%)	£2.30	£274,664	£30,518 Saving
Website	430,574 (76.1%)	32p	£137,784	£4,815 Cost
<b>Total potential savings =</b>				<b>£46,045 Saving</b>

<b>25% Channel Shift</b>				
<b>2019/20</b>	<b>Customer Visits</b>	<b>Cost per visit (average of Deloitte &amp; Socitm)</b>	<b>Reduced Cost</b>	<b>Change £</b>
Face to face	13,336	£11.44	£152,561	£50,854 Saving
Telephone	99,516	£2.30	£228,887	£76,296 Saving
Website	453,144	32p	£145,006	£12,038 Cost
<b>Total potential savings =</b>				<b>£115,112 Saving</b>

These potential savings can only be realised if the Council actively seeks to remove capacity from the operation:

- By reducing headcount in both the face-to-face and telephone operations, or re-assigning the same headcount new duties elsewhere where there is growth required,
- By reducing the supporting infrastructure (desktops, phones, call centre capacity) and internal Harlow Council resources (e.g. Finance, HR, facilities),
- Through back office efficiencies such as improving processes and reducing duplication.

Further savings could be made through either closing or restricting use of the cash office:

- By restricting the opening hours or reducing the staffing levels which would make it more difficult for customers to pay face-to-face.
- By making alternative arrangements such as providing e-payments facilities for customers of all council services to pay electronically.
- By encouraging, or even preventing, staff (as customers) from using the cash office. Clearly if staff prefer to pay using traditional means then they are unlikely to be encouraging customers to pay electronically.

As mentioned earlier, in addition to the cash office staff costs (in the region of £50k per annum) there would be savings from reduced / eliminating security fees, a proportion of the Duty Manager's time etc.

Annual billing, and other such regular contact with customers, provide a good way to reinforce the message about the convenience of self-service and the benefits to both the customer and the Council and should be used wherever possible.

## **5. Conclusion**

It is recommended that a full action plan is developed that will take forward the points from this review and that this will allow Harlow Council to successfully develop a course of action for the next four years.

## 6. National Readership Survey (NRS) demographic categories

Social Grade	Social Status	Occupation
A	upper middle class	higher managerial, administrative or professional
B	middle class	intermediate managerial, administrative or professional
C1	lower middle class	supervisory or clerical, junior managerial, administrative or professional
C2	skilled working class	skilled manual workers
D	working class	semi and unskilled manual workers
E	those at lowest level of subsistence	state pensioners or widows (no other earner), casual or lowest grade workers

## 7. Glossary

4G	Wireless Internet provided over mobile phone signals.
ACD	Automatic Call Distribution. This is used in call centres to ensure that calls are answered effectively.
Achieve Service	The software system used by Contact Harlow to log, track and monitor customer enquiries.
API	Application Programme Interfaces (APIs). These allow various IT systems to communicate with other systems .
Back Office	This is traditionally the service specialists. For example Housing Services.
Channel Shift	Also known as Channel Migration. This is where customers move from one method of interaction to another. For example a shift from seeing an advisor in person and instead interacting through the website.
Contact Harlow	The customer service team of Harlow Council.
CRM	This is the Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) Achieve Service is the CRM used by Harlow Council.
Deloitte	A company that provides professional advice services which include the areas of audit, financial advice and technology.
Firmstep	The software company that produces Achieve Service.
Front Office	This is the first point of contact for the customer. For example Contact Harlow.
Homefinder	The system used to bid on properties for those on the Housing list.
Infonet	The Council's internal internet system.
IVR	Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR). This is the automated payment system that allows customers to make payments over the phone 24 hours a day, 7 days a week without the need to speak to a Customer Advisor.
PayPoint/AllPay	Providers that allow customers to make payments to local shops who then pass the money on to the Council for a transaction fee.
Soctim	The Society of Information Technology Management. They promote the efficient use of Information Technology in Local Government and the Public Sector.
Whole Systems Thinking	An approach taken to ensure that all factors are taken into account and the impact they have when doing anything.
Wi-Fi	Wireless Internet provided through fixed line broadband.