

REPORT TO: CABINET

DATE: 21 JULY 2016

TITLE: CUSTOMER SERVICE REVIEW AND ACTION PLAN

PORTFOLIO HOLDER: COUNCILLOR EMMA TOAL

LEAD OFFICER: JANE GREER, HEAD OF COMMUNITY WELLBEING
(01279) 446406

CONTRIBUTING OFFICER: SIMON PIPE, CUSTOMER AND MEDIA SERVICES MANAGER (01279) 446888

This is a Key Decision
It is on the Forward Plan as Decision number I004189
Call-in Procedures may apply
This decision will affect no ward specifically.

RECOMMENDED that the Customer Service Action Plan at Appendix A is approved.

REASON FOR DECISION

- A** The Customer Service Review and associated Action Plan outlines how the Council will develop customer interaction up to March 2019. It provides a roadmap that sets out the key projects required to improve services and achieve a range of benefits that will ensure the future needs of both customers and the Council are met.

BACKGROUND

1. The most recent Customer Services and Access Strategy had an associated action plan that covered the period to the end of February 2014. The actions in this plan have all been largely achieved and there was a requirement to refresh this to ensure continuous improvement.
2. In July 2014, the Scrutiny Committee requested a review be undertaken in relation to Contact Harlow lost call rate and performance against the Council's complaint response times. This was completed in February 2015.
3. A consultant undertook a review to support the Council in developing an appropriate Action Plan to ensure the future needs of customers and the

Council are met. Implementation of the Action Plan will achieve a range of benefits and help ensure the Council's customer service delivery reflects that it is a customer focused organisation which delivers a consistently good service.

4. Many customers now expect to be able to contact the Council 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Implementation of the Action Plan will enable access to services and information online, at any time. Officers will encourage customers to use its online services and will provide support to do so where required.
5. It is important that the Council takes into account the needs of all of its customers and will seek to meet these where reasonable and practicable to do so. It is acknowledged that it is important to retain face to face contact for some customers. However, failing to recognise and implement a variety of contact channels and 24/7 access to services may have detrimental reputational and financial consequences for the Council.
6. This report highlights the key elements of the review and defines how the Council can deliver the required actions. The Customer Service Review document is attached as Appendix C with the Action Plan at Appendix A and timeframes at Appendix B.

INTRODUCTION

7. It is essential that the Council is able to provide high quality services to its customers whilst recognising the future challenges that lie ahead. This report and associated documents demonstrate that the Council is committed to providing a high quality, cost effective service that can be accessed by all users. Although there will be significant challenges that may require a reduction in the services that are currently provided, there will be provision for other methods of customer interaction that will address this.
8. The attached review highlights that in the future it is likely there will be a need for face-to-face and telephone based services, but increasingly self-service will be the channel of choice for many residents.

The pace of this change toward self-service will be determined locally by a number of factors including:

- (a) The availability of traditional channels and longer queuing and wait times.
- (b) The availability of self-service channels, including how well they are promoted and how easy they are to locate.
- (c) Whether the self-service transaction is quick and the facility easy to use.
- (d) The extent to which customers have the ability or inclination to self-serve.

9. The Council's website is likely to become the first point of enquiry for the majority of customers. If they cannot find the information they require or use self-service for their request such as a reporting a missed bin, then they will raise a service request by phone or face-to-face. Both of these methods will incur significant additional cost for the Council. It is therefore vital that as much as possible is available via self-service, preventing avoidable calls and visits.
10. It is likely that financial pressures will require the Council to deliver more for less in the future. The Council needs to be positioned to respond appropriately by having the right procedures in place to ensure:
 - (a) Information available to advisors and customers is kept relevant and service requests are tracked and can be reported on at any point.
 - (b) Complaint analysis is undertaken and that corrective action can be put in place, ensuring that the same issue does not arise again.
 - (c) Any interaction, which could be avoided by improving self-service facilities, is identified and the necessary improvements made.
 - (d) Front and back office communicates any issues and then jointly agrees resolution.
11. In order for the Council to achieve this, an Action Plan has been developed based on the outcome of the review that sets out both a timetable and the associated actions required. Implementing the Action Plan is likely to achieve a range of benefits, including:
 - (a) Improving customer satisfaction with the Council.
 - (b) Allowing 24/7 access to a range of services.
 - (c) Potential financial efficiency savings.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

12. Implementation of the approach is outlined in paragraphs 13 to 32. Implementing the Action Plan successfully will increase choice for customers, extend the period of time that people can access services, optimise resources and help improve outcomes for customers and enhance the reputation of the Council. The Action Plan contains the following outcomes.

Establish a Customer Services Board

13. The Customer Services Board will drive forward the initiatives proposed. The Board will take a holistic approach to the recommendations and will be in a position to influence the whole organisation. For example, by not simply

increasing staffing levels to accommodate demand, but better understand what has driven the demand and addressing the root cause.

14. The Customer Services Board will monitor progress against the Action Plan and the impact on customer services. This includes customer adoption of the initiatives, the take up of new channels and the need to adjust accordingly.
15. It is proposed that the Customer Services Board is amalgamated with the existing ICT Board to ensure the two are aligned and any duplication is avoided. This will ensure a joined up approach and provide cost benefits in terms of Officer time. It will also ensure that any procured software solutions can be integrated in existing infrastructure.

Consulting with Customers

16. A key component of any successful customer service operation is a good understanding of customers, what they want and need, why they behave as they do and what could be done to improve services for customers. Understanding these points is vital to discovering the tasks that need to be undertaken to achieve a channel migration. Service users and other interested groups will be consulted about proposals to change which will be developed following input from customers.

Introduce a whole systems thinking approach

17. Whole systems thinking aims to ensure that all factors are taken into account and the impact this has. For example, A customer contact centre could be fully staffed with fully trained staff, but if they are unable to resolve enquiries due to a lack of IT systems or because of back office blockages then this will impact their effectiveness in dealing with customers. The review has identified a need to ensure whole system thinking is adopted across the organisation at all levels.

Publish an Annual Report on Complaints

18. An annual report will be published which will provide information on the number and type of complaints the Council receives each year. As well as providing greater transparency, this information can be used to provide information on service delivery to improve the customer experience and reduce complaints.

Strengthen Contact Harlow's working relationship

19. There is a need to ensure Contact Harlow continues to develop the relationship between the front and back office. This will also ensure that

customer intelligence is acted upon and used to improve services. This approach will ensure that channel migration opportunities are fully exploited and encourage discussion on issues that work against the whole-system thinking approach.

Accelerate the development of 'My Harlow' Self Service portal

20. A key project will be the development of a 'My Harlow' Self-Service Portal', which will provide customers with a comprehensive range of online information and services. Much has already been achieved in this area and further development is likely to require an increase in the resources within the Contact Harlow system administration team. The full costs will be explored through the Customer Services Board. Any additional costs will be relatively short term and it is likely to bring associated savings and other benefits in the longer term.
21. The portal will allow customers to easily identify services that are relevant to them based on their demographics, prior service needs or location. It will also allow them to subscribe to information that is useful and relevant to their needs and to track the status of requests they have made to the Council. A single view of customers' relationship with the Council will provide a far better understanding of customers' needs, allowing more accurate targeting of services and will provide benefits for customers whilst lowering costs.

Redesign of the ground floor and investment opportunities

22. The current physical layout of the Contact Centre complimented the Council's previous Customer Service Strategy, but it does not encourage customers to change behaviour and switch to other channels. Also it does not recognise the extensive growth in the use and capability of smart phones. The following initiatives will be considered as part of the redesign.
 - (a) The use of floor walkers with mobile technology to assist customers with quick or simple requests will be investigated.
 - (b) A significant proportion of footfall is provided by cash office users and its position therefore informs the design of the physical space. Changing to a non cash handling service would be a well-managed and considered process taken over time. It will not stall other changes that could be made to the area to encourage channel migration.
 - (c) A self-service philosophy will be brought into the heart of the customer experience. Customers will be able to see other customers transacting online whilst in the Contact Centre and this combined with

associated promotion and marketing will assist in changing behaviour.

- (d) A change to the layout of customer seating will also reduce the amount of noise filtering into the booths from waiting customers.
- (e) Staff across the Council will be briefed on self-service functionality and encouraged to promote the digital by default culture to friends and family, as well as customers.

23. It is recognised that all of these actions will require investment at a time of financial pressure. However, if extra space is created in the ground floor area, it may create an opportunity to generate additional income by sharing space with other service providers. Several other councils have undertaken similar projects successfully.

Appointment based walk-in service

24. At the present, time customers have the option to walk in without an appointment and see a Customer Advisor. This makes it difficult to encourage customers not to do so and use self-service instead. Moving to an appointment-based walk-in service will allow the Council to resource the service appropriately and offer a guaranteed appointment. It is also likely to deter those who through convenience or habit (rather than need) prefer to speak face-to-face with a Customer Advisor.

Develop a customer focused applications strategy

25. The development of the 'My Harlow' Self-Service Portal is likely to require the procurement of new software/hardware, which will allow the 'My Harlow' portal to communicate with other systems and ensure that the information given to the customer is accurate and secure.
26. The Customer Services Board will ensure that any new self-service system works with the Customer Relationship Management software (CRM) rather than providing its own self-service portal, ensuring a more joined up approach.
27. Whilst it will take some time for the impact of a new application strategy to take effect, it is expected that the benefits will be significant in the longer term. The application strategy should try to reduce, over time, the number of application systems in place within Harlow Council. Rather than procuring a new system, opportunities will be taken to see if existing systems could be used to perform a similar function.

Planned closure of the Cash Office

28. Complete closure of the Cash Office would save in the region of £60k per annum in staffing and cash collection costs. It would also require alternative solutions to be put in place for customers to make payments, the cost of which is estimated to be a similar amount in the first year. The savings would be realised in later years.
29. There are many opportunities to reduce the impact upon customers and a full communications plan would be put in place demonstrating to customers other methods of payment that may be available to them.
30. A full impact assessment would need to be undertaken prior to any closure although many other councils have successfully closed their cash offices. Within Essex, only Epping Forest DC still promotes cash payments directly, three councils have payment machines only and the remainder have no advertised facilities to take payments directly and instead direct customers to internet payments.
31. The alternatives include greater promotion of Direct Debit as well as partnership arrangements with other services in the town such as the Post Office, banks and local shops. This will provide a wide range of locations to pay which may benefit residents.

Encourage customers to use self-service facilities

32. There are different approaches to achieving channel migration but a clear approach to encourage customers will need to be adopted. This could include reducing office opening hours and targeted promotion of self-service facilities that may encourage customers to use other methods. It will be essential that all information is available electronically in a format that is easy to access and use. A full plan would be developed to ensure that this was successful.

CONCLUSION

33. Implementing the proposed Customer Services Action Plan will ensure that there is a clear direction for how the Council will interact with its customers now and in the future. The table at Appendix B maps out the schedule of actions from paragraphs 13 to 32 and this is reflected in the Action Plan.

IMPLICATIONS

Place (includes Sustainability)

None specific

Author: **Graeme Bloomer, Head of Place**

Finance (Includes ICT)

The Action plan sets out clearly the potential savings and costs associated with the implementation of the Strategy. These may vary over time but it currently provides a good indication of the implications of full implementation if agreed.

Author: **Simon Freeman, Head of Finance**

Housing

As outlined in the report

Author: **Andrew Murray, Head of Housing**

Community Wellbeing (includes Equalities and Social Inclusion)

As outlined in the report.

Author: **Jane Greer, Head of Community Wellbeing**

Governance (includes HR)

None specific

Author: **Brian Keane, Interim Head of Governance**

Appendices

Appendix A – Action Plan

Appendix B – Action Plan indicative timeframe

Appendix C - Customer Service Review report

Background Papers

None.

Glossary of terms/abbreviations used

ICT – Information and Communications Technology

Channel migration - 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.