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| 31 January 2019 | | ITEM: 6 |
| Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee | | |
| Customer Services Strategy Progress Update | | |
| Wards and communities affected: All | Key Decision: Key | |
| Report of: Tracie Heiser, Assistant Director of Customer Services | | |
| Accountable Assistant Director: Tracie Heiser, Assistant Director of Customer Services | | |
| Accountable Director: Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services | | |
| This report is public | | |

Executive Summary

The Customer Service Strategy, approved at Cabinet in April 2017, set out where the council was in relation to customer service delivery, where it wanted to be and how it would get there. It provided a strategic overview to set the direction of travel for customer services throughout the organisation with an action plan for how the council will improve service to our customers across all access channels.

The strategy acknowledged that in order to deliver the standard of customer services required, the council needed to address issues of people, process, technology and organisation, managing our resources to optimum effect. To succeed it would be necessary to create a culture supported by the right operational procedures and infrastructure to 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.

The strategy includes a real 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 report provides an update on delivery of the strategy action plan.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 That the committee comment on the progress delivered against the Customer Services Strategy key actions.

1.2 That the committee comment on strategy actions currently in progress and provide suggestions for any further development areas.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 Customer Services functions (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 Customer Services Strategy was developed to address the following challenges:

- Inconsistent customer service standards across all council services
- Lack of communication of what our 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
- Reluctance to change including understanding and use of digital methods
- Need to reduce avoidable contacts and promote proactive contact with residents
- Refresh of contact centre telephony platform and other technology enhancements i.e. web chat
- Opportunities for further service calls through the contact centre to deliver efficiencies and explore as a potential growth area and for income generation.

2.2 Prior to the strategy development approx. 38,000 telephone calls were handled by the contact centre each month within an additional approx. 8,000 face-to-face visits to the civic offices. Residents were 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 were also commonly about parking permits and providing documentation for benefits and housing applications which were both lengthy transactions.

2.3 Many, although not all, of these services, or elements of them, were available online. My Account was introduced in October 2013 providing access to services and transactions online.

2.4 Face to face customer service has always been the most expensive channel followed by telephone contact, with web /online the most cost effective.

- 2.5 Previous surveys and consultations had told us that Thurrock residents, in the main, have the skills to access services online and utilise our existing self-service options. The council was already encouraging and supporting customers to use the internet for straightforward transactions but the face-to-face one to one facility was available for every transaction regardless of the service being online. The key challenge was to improve digital access options and raise awareness of these but not stop traditional methods such as telephone or face-to-face, just free these up more for those that really need to use them – often residents with complex and sensitive needs.
- 2.6 The aim was to minimise the need for customers to contact the council but if they do, provide them with an excellent self-service experience that is quick and convenient and ensure other available contact channels were publicised 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 Some of the key actions included in the approved strategy are summarised below:

- Implement a new contact centre telephony platform
- Achieve Customer Contact Association industry accreditation for the Customer Services Department
- Agree and implement online only services where appropriate ensuring support is always available for customers that cannot utilise online services and need extra help
- Transform face to face customer services area creating a brand new customer services delivery model on the ground floor at civic offices
- Develop more online services
- Develop a cross council customer excellence training programme with the flexibility to meet the needs of many different council service areas
- Develop a new Council Customer Service Charter
- All of the above aimed to embed the principles for customer services delivery across the organisation

3.2 Progress to date for these key actions:

3.2.1 Implement a new contact centre telephony platform

- A New Mitel telephony platform was implemented in October 2017 without any service disruption
- This is a much more advanced solution with greater capacity, improved real-time information, enhanced reporting and increased resilience
- Customers continue to have the opportunity to answer a satisfaction survey following their contact centre call. Satisfaction levels are collated monthly as well as the messages that are left which are used to provide feedback to the

Customer Service Advisors and services. 98% of customers were satisfied with the service in the last few months of 2018.

3.2.2 Achieve Customer Contact Association (CCA) industry accreditation for the Thurrock Council Customer Services Department

- An independent audit was completed by the British Standards Institute in June 2018 – all areas met the criteria with zero non-conformances against any module and an excellent audit report. This was a very robust assessment covering all areas of customer services.
- Four Customer Services Advisors completed the CCA Inspire Programme for high performing colleagues - they achieved CCA accredited Customer Service Professional certificates and this will now be a regular programme.
- The Customer Services Department were also highly commended in the United Kingdom Contact Centre Forum Public Sector Awards for Public Sector Contact Centre of the Year
- The Assistant Director of Customer Services also received a highly commended award for Head of Customer Services of the Year across all sectors in the United Kingdom Contact Centre Forum Awards

3.2.3 Agree and implement online only services where appropriate ensuring support always available for customers that cannot utilise online services

- Some services have now been identified as suitable for online only such as bulky waste, council tax exemptions, anything that can easily be accessed online that doesn't require support, isn't a service failure or may be detrimental to the council if information not provided – support is still always provided where customers are vulnerable or unable to access our online services.
- Customers have adapted to this well overall as it improves access for them as they then have awareness of the online offering enabling them to access at any time from their own home, a local hub or library
- Support is also provided by the contact centre, face-to-face customer service advisors, libraries / hub staff and volunteers to assist customers when setting up their online accounts.
- Web chat is also available to support customers experiencing difficulties setting up their online accounts
- All housing and housing benefit applications are online only but support is always provided with assisted self-service via phone or in person at civic offices
- Floorwalkers are also available within the face to face service area to support customers utilising our self-service facilities

3.2.4 Transform the face-to-face customer services area on the ground floor

- The refurbishment and a fresh new modern look for the ground floor civic offices customer services area has been created. All technology and furniture

will be transferred to the new area when the Civic Offices extension and transformation is completed.

- A new business visitor check in area with its own specific waiting area has been created to provide a more professional image for council visitors - excellent feedback from visitors received
- Meet and greet floorwalkers are now in place to greet visitors and determine the most appropriate service for them when they arrive i.e. online self-service service, document scanning, specific one to one service for vulnerable customers etc.
- Individual face to face service desks have been established for vulnerable customers resulting in more time and support available for those that really need the help with vastly reduced waiting times
- Two new document-scanning booths have been implemented with assisted Customer Service Advisor support to verify appropriate documents and scan directly to the service areas. This is a much smoother process with vastly reduced transaction and wait times. 6,797 customers used the service between May and mid-December. The handling time of these transactions has reduced from approx. 25 minutes to approximately 5 minutes.
- A self-service DDA compliant area has been created with rise and fall desks, and PC's to support customers that are unable to stand and use the self-service tablets
- The changes have created more space to enable us to establish a separate waiting area for people seeking housing and homelessness advice, which provides more privacy for these customers when they visit.
- The changes created a £225k saving without the need for any redundancies at the same time providing an enhanced service with reduced wait times and no upheld complaints.

Wait time in minutes and seconds (target less than 10 minutes):

| Year | August | Sept | Oct | Nov |
|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
| 18/19 | 02:55 | 03:24 | 01:47 | 01:28 |
| 17/18 | 08:08 | 08:03 | 09:43 | 07:57 |
| 16/17 | 06:06 | 06:41 | 08:39 | 04:10 |

Total number of visitors:

| Year | Aug | Sept | Oct | Nov |
|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|
| 18/19 | 6,546 | 5,212 | 5,382 | 4,841 |
| 17/18 | 9,586 | 7,035 | 10,182 | 10,795 |
| 16/17 | 7,594 | 9,400 | 8,113 | 8,102 |

3.2.5 Develop more online services

- The Initial focus has been on parking permits as this was not very customer focused and required all customers to visit civic offices to apply and collect their permits - the only other alternative was to apply by post. There were approximately 400 customers per month for this service within the face-to-

face customer services area and this was increasing due to additional permit zone development.

- A new online parking permit solution was implemented in August 2018 for resident, business and visitor permits
- Customers can now apply from home and upload their supporting documents directly from their phone / home device without the need to visit civic offices
- Excellent feedback has been received so far regarding this new online solution and from August to mid-December, 2,526 customers have already used this solution
- We will continue to monitor demand and identify areas for further online development

3.2.6 Develop a cross council customer excellence-training programme with the flexibility to meet the needs of many different service areas

- A new customer excellence training programme 'Right First Time' has been developed
- Approximately 500 frontline employees have attended since April 2018 from Customer Services, Environment, Waste and Housing
- This targeted approach will continue and all employees with customer contact roles will attend
- The training includes service specific scenarios so it relates to each service and is meaningful for the attendees
- The training includes an overview of our vision and priorities, our customer services vision and principles, a real focus on 'Right First Time', digital awareness, behaviours and skills, face-to-face techniques, good / bad call examples, listening techniques, questioning techniques, assisting vulnerable residents. It also has a modular approach so can also be adapted for any council service area.
- 98% of attendees have rated this as excellent

3.2.7 Develop a new Customer Service Charter

- A new customer promise was launched during National Customer Service week in October and is now included in induction, customer excellence training and displayed around civic offices, libraries and community hubs. It is also available on our web site.
- The promise demonstrates our commitment to our customers in relation to the standards the council will always aim to meet when serving them and reflects the overall strategy.

3.3 Many actions within the strategy will continue into 2019 and progress reported to the Customer and Demand Management Board. Ongoing actions include:

- Continue with the targeted rollout of customer excellence training to cover all service areas

- Continue to promote customer service activities to maintain momentum regarding the importance of a high standard of customer services across the council i.e. activities like National Customer Services Week
- Continue to consistently achieve all customer services operational targets i.e. wait times, customer satisfaction, telephony response etc.
- Continue to support vulnerable customer initiatives i.e. developing a single view of debtor
- Finalise the development of the cross council customer service quality framework to monitor customer service delivery and support action planning for all council services
- Continue to provide valuable insight to the Customer and Demand Management Board to identify opportunities for service improvement or transformation
- Maintain the Customer Services CCA accreditation at the next assessment due in June 2019
- Provide a large screen for consultation and communication campaign information within the customer services area to ensure residents are kept up to date with council news and changes.
- Explore other technology including web chat enhancement and artificial intelligence options

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 The committee are invited to comment on the delivery so far against the Customer Services Strategy and its action plan as well as identify any other areas for consideration.

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

- 5.1 Consultation and development of the strategy took 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 commented on the draft strategy as part of the consultation process ahead of the final strategy, which was presented and agreed at Cabinet in April 2017. The purpose of this report is to provide a progress update on the agreed strategy actions.

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

- 6.1 Delivery of the strategy is helping the council transform its customers' experience. Customers have improved access to services and the council is improving the skills of its workforce, helping them to guide customers to the right services for them.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Dammy Adewole**
Management Accountant – Finance and IT

There are no financial implications at this stage. Should further additional technology enhancements be identified, a business case will be developed and capital programme bid process will be utilised. Substantial savings of £225k have already been delivered since April 2017 as a result of this strategy, whilst at the same time improving the service for customers.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **David Lawson**
Assistant Director – Law and Governance,
Monitoring Officer

There are no legal implications.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project
Monitoring Officer – Adults Housing and
Health

An equality impact assessment was completed prior to the changes and great care has been taken to ensure that the needs of all council customers are met. The enhancements have include a specific DDA compliant self-service area along with specific one to one Customer Advisor support for those customers that need this service and are unable to self-serve. The advisors are now able to spend more time with the customers that really need it and the wait times have reduced considerably. Floorwalkers are permanently on hand to support customers to utilise the self-service options at civic offices and support is also provided at libraries and community hubs.

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):

- Customer Services Strategy – Cabinet report, April 2017

9. Appendices to the report

- None

Report Author:

Tracie Heiser, Assistant Director

Customer Services