

**CUSTOMER, COMMUNITY & PARTNERSHIP SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**Minutes of a meeting of the Customer, Community & Partnership Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday, 25 April 2016 at 6.00pm in Meeting Room G4, Addenbrook House, Ironmasters Way, Telford, TF3 4NT 7**

**Present:** Councillors N England, J Ashford, G Cook, S J Reynolds, P Scott, J Seymour, B Tillotson.

**Also Present:** A Astley, Assistant Director Customer & Neighbourhood Services (CCP-19); L Higgins, Customer, Benefits, Registration & Library Services Manager (CCP-19); S Jones, Scrutiny Officer.

**CCP-13      Apologies for Absence**

Cllr. K Guy  
Cllr S Davies Cabinet member Business, Neighbourhood & Customer Services

**CCP-14      Declarations of Interest**

None

**CCP-15      Minutes**

**Resolved** – that the minutes of the meeting of the Customer, Community & Partnership Scrutiny Committee held on 9 November 2015 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

**CCP-16      Customer Services**

The Chair introduced the item with a reminder that there were two issues the committee wished to address, namely how the needs of people without smart phones or the internet were being taken into account as the Council developed more digital and online services and how issues with waiting times at the contact centre were being addressed.

**1. Channel shift**

The Assistant Director (AD) outlined the Council's 'channel shift' strategy making the following points:

- Channel shift was defined as 'the creation of effective and efficient channels that are most appropriate for the customer and the organisation'. Traditional methods of contact included telephone, face-to-face, letter, email and website.
- The Society of Information Technology Management had costed different types of customer contact with local authorities (face to face = £14.00; post = £12.10; telephone = £5.00; Intelligent Voice Recognition (IVR) = £0.20; online/App = £0.17) which clearly showed that online contacts were the cheapest. The Council

needed to save a further £30m and there was a recognition that significant savings could be made through channel shift. It was also recognised that many residents preferred to use digital channels and had an increasing expectation of digital access 24/7. The channel shift strategy had therefore been developed to meet two objectives; to save money and to meet demand from customers.

- Examples were provided of different types of channel shift tools and how they had been used, or were being developed, to improve access to services for customers and to reduce costs.
  - **Web forms** were used across 88 services to enable customers to contact services, make transactions and to pay Council Tax. Web forms were routed directly to the relevant service to process or complete the transaction.
  - **Web chat** was about to go live. This would enable customers to receive help via a SMS conversation with a customer services advisor.
  - **Website content** – a significant amount of work had been done to improve the quality and usefulness of information on the website to reduce the need for customers to make telephone enquiries, for example, the use of user-friendly explanatory notes on a sample benefits letter. There had also been increasing use of videos to promote Council services or consultations as used to good effect during the budget consultation.
  - **E-Gov / News for You online subscription** – customers could register online to receive e-bulletins on topics of interest. Registrations were increasing which helped to save money on sending out leaflets.
  - **Everyday Telford App** was used for residents to report issues in their local area such as abandoned trollies, fly tipping, drainage problems, benefit fraud etc. It had been improved by running Google maps for residents to pin point problems easily. Reports go straight to the relevant operative which had improved response times.
  - **Online appointments** had been introduced at First Point at Southwater 1 (SW1) to reduce waiting times and improve staff planning. Customers with an appointment were guaranteed to be seen within 5-10 minutes. Customers could still drop in at SW1 and would not be turned away, but if no advisors were free they would be given the choice of waiting or making an appointment for another time.
  - **SMS (text messaging)** was used to send reminders of appointments or other alerts. Texts tended to generate a better response from customers than letters, and were faster, more direct and cheaper.
  - **Intelligent Voice Recognition (IVR)** was being developed as another channel. The technology had improved in recent years and was being developed for simple transactions. IVR was live as a 'Bin Day finder' and was being developed to report Missed Bins to reduce the number of calls to the contact centre from people checking their bin day.
  - **My Telford** was a key innovation which would enable customers to create a personal Council account for reporting and tracking issues and to access information and alerts relevant to their local area. My Telford would be integrated with systems used by services across the Council. The product was being developed in-house to save costs and to create more tailored

package for customers. A soft launch was planned for late June/July and it was suggested Members of the Committee could be involved in testing.

- **My Council Tax** went live in January 2016 as an online portal enabling customers to view bills online, set up a direct debit, report changes of circumstance and view a summary of Council Tax Support and housing benefit details, with potential savings of £2.50 per person signing up.
- There were already 80 live digital services. A list of the services was provided to demonstrate the range of the offer.
- A diagram was provided to show the IT infrastructure behind the online services. A Client Relationship Management (CRM) system would hold the individual citizen records and link to systems used by individual service areas. A significant amount of work was involved in integrating the systems and creating a single record for each customer. The other critical issue was to ensure staff have equipment to work remotely as mobile working could improve response times and save on accommodation costs.
- A key issue in channel shift was to recognise different customer needs. Not everyone could, or wanted to, use digital technology. Some authorities had taken a hard line and only provided services online. Telford & Wrekin had taken a different approach and would provide different channels to meet different customer needs. Customers fell into four broad categories:
  - ‘Ready to shift’ were people for whom digital was a lifestyle choice and who have an expectation of online services – the new channels needed to be promoted to them.
  - ‘Not aware of online services’ were people capable of using the technology but perhaps lacking trust in online services and preferring to talk to someone – this group needed to be encouraged, supported and given confidence in the online response.
  - ‘Do not have the skills, technology, confidence to channel shift’ – were people who have not used digital technology but may use it if they were supported.
  - ‘Unable to channel shift / self-serve’ – were people who would never use online services and will continue to use face-to-face and telephone contactThe aim was to ‘nudge’ the majority of customers online and to target resources at people who could be helped and supported to make the transition.
- In terms of how people would be helped to make the shift, staff in libraries, community centres or other Council buildings would be critical to offering access and helping people develop skills. A new training programme had been developed ‘ICT training for the terrified!’ for delivery in libraries. Staff at SW1 promoted online services to customers and asked if the customer would like to be shown how to use the technology. The strategy was evolving and any ideas from the committee would be welcomed.
- Channel shift was about ‘nudging’ people, i.e. encouraging people to change behaviour through psychology and not about telling people what to do or coercion. A practical example of ‘nudging’ was provided using a sample benefits letter requesting further information from the customer. Previously, customers

had been advised to send information by post (top option), by email (middle option) or visit SW1 (bottom option). The new format advised customers to return information by email (the top option), asked customers to tell us their mobile number so they could be texted in future, advised customers they could report changes in circumstance online and then provided details for posting information or visiting SW1 explaining that they have to wait at busy times. The information was structured to 'nudge' people to the cheapest channel of communication. Telephone numbers were only removed from contact information where it was absolutely appropriate. Direct debit was the oldest form of channel shift and 77% of residents pay Council Tax by direct debit. If everyone were to use direct debit there would be a big saving to the Council. The Council was signed up to a national campaign which offered £5,000 prizes for people switching (the prize was not funded by the Council).

- The next steps in the strategy included:
  - A refresh and development of the channel shift strategy and action plan for the next 3 years
  - A small channel shift team (of two) would work with service areas to help them put in place service action plans to ensure the tools were deployed.
  - My Telford would be launched in June or July
  - A document management system would be developed to cope with the increase in online documents and reduce the use of paper
  - Further development of the single citizen record and deployment of CRM across the Council. 50% of services had been incorporated and adult care would be next.

The following additional information was provided in response to questions:

- The risks of IVR not recognising what the customer was saying had been reduced by using the technology for simple and uncomplicated transactions. As a back-up, the caller would be given the option of speaking to an operator.
- The contact history in My Telford would log each new enquiry and responses from staff informing the customer how the issue had been resolved. The contact history would start from the date the customer registered and would not be backdated with historic enquiries.
- Customers who need to provide documents to the benefits or Council Tax team could photograph them on their smartphone and send them online. If a customer did not know how to send documents by email they could be shown by an advisor at SW1. There was a three day guaranteed response time for online contacts so customers could be assured there would be no delay.
- Research showed around 85% of residents in Telford and Wrekin had smartphones. Users tended to be younger people and people of working age.
- Young people turning 18 today would be the first generation to grow up with the internet and over the next 2-3 years as they start to use Council services they would expect to do business with the Council online. Young people of school age were unlikely to have any desire to contact the Council and promoting the new channels through schools may not be effective in engaging young people.
- The introduction of the new channels meant that the First Point Saturday service at SW1 had ceased. It was thought that customers who work during the week would be likely to be able to use the online and digital channels.

- Customer email addresses and text numbers were being collected by the contact centre as a matter of routine to build up the database but it was early days.
- Customers' mobile numbers were used mainly for text purposes as calls to mobiles were more expensive than text or landline.
- The contact centre system could remember numbers and had caller display.
- A telephone number was not promoted as one of the channels of contact on the new benefits letter but the telephone number still appeared on the letterhead and customers tended to use the main switchboard number if they wanted to call.
- Channel shift was likely to lessen the number of calls to the contact centre by nudging people away from the telephone.
- It was hoped the information provided at this meeting would reassure members about the benefits of channels shift, but that there would still be channels for people who do not or cannot use digital channels to contact the Council. A report on the strategy would be presented to Cabinet.

Members put forward several ideas for the channel shift communications strategy:

- Work with Town and Parish Councils to provide internet access points and support / training for customers to use the new channels;
- Explore the option of collecting email information from the elections team as people registered online;
- Offering incentives to register online e.g. voucher for skating taster session;
- Promotion through partners such as GP surgeries, Age Concern UK, luncheon clubs or groups which would cascade information through their networks;
- There were mixed views on setting a date to introduce paperless Council meetings as tablets were rolled out to Members.

## **2. Contact centre**

The Manager gave an overview of performance at the contact centre and how issues with waiting times were being addressed, highlighting the following points:

- The contact centre received an average of 26,000 calls every week. Several steps had been taken to address issues with waiting times. New management had been put in place which was grasping the issues. A new system had been put in place to enable calls to be recorded for quality monitoring and training purposes and support was being provided to the agents in the team. A call-back system had been introduced for customers waiting over three minutes which gave customers the option of requesting a call back within 30 minutes. Customer satisfaction monitoring had been introduced. Agent performance was reviewed each day based on five random calls. From May, a number of benefits assessors would move into the contact centre to increase capacity to deal with benefits enquiries.
- Data was provided to compare performance in June 2015 with January 2016 showing improvement across all indicators. The maximum call waiting time in June 2015 was 1 hour, 9 minutes and 20 seconds and in January 2016 was 19 minutes and 33 seconds. The number of callers waiting over 20 minutes was 1,769 in June 2015 and 50 in January 2016 (i.e. 50 calls out of 25,000). The call abandonment rate had fallen from 24% to 9.5% over the same period with a

target to reduce to 8%. Since the introduction of channel shift, the number of customers visiting First Point at Southwater 1 (SW1) had reduced from 1,430 in June 2015 to 681 in January 2016. The amount of work for back office staff dealing with the enquiries was the same, but there were far fewer people queuing for the service. The introduction of the appointment system meant that in January 2016 no visitors had waited longer than 5 minutes to see an advisor, compared to the maximum wait of 1 hour 24 minutes recorded for June 2015. Customers dropping in were given the option of waiting until an advisor was available or making an appointment for later or another day.

- March 2016 had been the busiest month at the contact centre ever with 30,000 calls. Performance had remained strong with 94.4% of all calls being answered within ten minutes.

The following information was provided in response to members' questions:

- Calls about benefits were currently routed to the benefits team but moving benefits assessors into the contact centre would increase capacity within the centre and create opportunities for up-skilling and re-skilling.
- Recorded messages on the call-waiting system were used to promote alternative channels for the customer to make an enquiry or payment, and to provide routine information about common enquires so the customer may receive an answer without needing to speak to an agent. For example, the message may confirm the date of housing benefit payments which hundreds of customers call to check each month.
- It was difficult to benchmark performance with other authorities as each authority had its own channels for customers to access different services. Organisations tended to benchmark against what were deemed acceptable standards applied to their own circumstances.
- A query about 20+ minute call waiting time figures for January 2016 would be investigated and clarification provided to the committee after the meeting.
- The call-back option was triggered after three minutes to give customers the choice of waiting or being called back within 30 minutes.
- More transactions had been transferred, or would be transferred, to the contact centre for services to benefit from the infrastructure and to bring economies of scale. As new services were absorbed into the contact centre some staff were migrated from the service area to the contact centre where staff were up-skilled and re-skilled to deal with other types of calls to increase overall capacity. This meant that even though more services would be accessed via the contact centre it would still be possible to meet performance targets.
- The contact centre was aimed at residents and the Council provided alternative channels for businesses to access Council services including through First Point at Wellington. Business support strategies were being developed with the launch of the Growth Hub and Enterprise Telford. The committee would be looking at support for businesses at the next meeting on 10 May.
- Issues with waiting times at the contact centre had long been recognised but the opportunity had been seized to address the issues through the recent restructure. New management, new technology and new performance monitoring been introduced to tackle embedded issues. The team was being supported and the merger of benefits assessors into the contact centre would bring further benefits.

- Web chats were not live yet but would be introduced. Requests would be assigned to an operator and each operator could manage up to five chats. If all assigned operators were busy the service would go off line until an operator became available.
- As part of the Council's IT upgrade, Office 360 would be installed which would enable support to be offered via Skype, potentially be linked to access points in Town or Parish Council offices, libraries etc.
- If a customer rated the service very poor the recording of the conversation would be reviewed to find out what had happened and to identify any staff training needs. If an advisor had given the wrong or poor advice, the customer would be called with an apology and the correct information. If a staff training need was identified, the focus would be on up-skilling the officer.
- Opportunities to sell products commercially were considered and some Apps had already been sold to other authorities. However, the priority for 'My Telford' was to get it right for the Council before any thought could be given to marketing it as a commercial product. A key issue would be having the resources to support external clients especially as the specialist skills were in short supply. If it were possible, a business case would be worked up.

There was a discussion about the further work the committee would carry out.

- Members requested a performance update to come to a meeting in July.
- It was agreed that the committee would be involved in testing My Telford prior to it going live and in testing the Missed Bins IVR system.
- It was suggested that members needing to call the contact centre could take the opportunity to 'mystery shop' the service.

**Resolved- that**

- a) That an update on performance at the contact centre be brought to a meeting in July**
- b) That the committee be involved in the testing of 'My Telford' and the Intelligent Voice Recognition system for Missing Bins**

**CCP-17      WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chair opened a discussion about issues to explore at the meeting on 10 May about business support. Members were asked to email any specific issues to the Scrutiny Officer so that information could be requested for the meeting. The Chair suggested that members try searching for business support information on the internet to test out how information could be accessed, and bring their comments to the meeting. There was then a further discussion about other items for the work programme. Customer services, waste services and traffic management were agreed as items for future meetings, but a suggestion to consider the supply of housing land in the Local Plan was rejected as scrutiny had considered the engagement strategy but the content of the Local Plan had not been deemed appropriate for scrutiny and scrutiny could not consider decisions of the Planning Committee.

**Resolved – that**

**Reports on the impact of the traffic signal technology (SCOOT and MOVA), and performance monitoring of the waste services contract, be brought to a future meeting.**

In response to a question from the Committee about the appointment of co-optees, the Chair explained that there were two candidates under consideration and that interviews would be carried out shortly as it was anticipated that the Committee would have a greater allocation of resources for the next municipal year which would create a greater role for the co-optees.

The meeting ended at 7.55pm

**Chairman:** .....

**Date:** .....