

Report for: Cabinet

Date of Meeting:	18 July 2022
Subject:	Improving the Customer Experience
Key Decision:	No
Responsible Officer:	Charlie Stewart – Corporate Director, Resources
Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Stephen Greek - Portfolio Holder for Performance, Communications and Customer Experience
Exempt:	No
Decision subject to Call-in:	Yes
Wards affected:	All wards
Enclosures:	Appendix A – Improving the Customer Experience presentation

Section 1 – Summary and Recommendations

This report sets out the plans to improve the customer experience.

Recommendations:

Cabinet is requested to:

1. Approve the Customer Experience vision and principles
2. Note that a plan to introduce the strategy will be brought back to Cabinet later this year.

Reason (for recommendations): On 24 May 2022 Cabinet agreed that a key priority of the Council would be to put its residents first and treat both residents and businesses as valued customers. This strategy outlines how this priority will be achieved and brings together current activity with future proposed direction.

Section 2 – Report

Options considered

1. Develop a strategy by reviewing current plans, considering future customer needs, modern customer service delivery models and technology and the best outcomes for the Borough.
2. Only use current plans to inform the strategy
3. Do nothing.

Option 1 is seen as the most beneficial as it considers all the aspects, both current and future, and the new Administrations direction in developing the strategy.

Current situation

At their meeting of 24 May, Cabinet agreed that one their key priority was to put residents first and treat both residents and businesses as valued customers.

In practice this means ensuring that any interaction is a positive one with the Council being approachable, accessible, responsive and informative through the best use of technology.

The Council provides hundreds of different services to residents and businesses with tens of millions of interactions taking place each year and they therefore 'experience' customer service through many different routes.

The journey through the Council that residents and businesses take to get their needs met are varied and often complex. Part of our strategy will be to understand these journeys better and how they can be improved. There are different types of interactions with the Council – for example, a resident or business may be requesting a service, making a report or complaint, or may

themselves be the subject of enforcement action. In some cases, the resident or business may not like or agree with the outcome, but wherever possible should feel that their case has been handled fairly and efficiently by the Council. Where there are persistent complaints, we will also need to review our policy to ensure it is fair, open and robust.

Many Council services are well managed and the majority of the millions of transactions are handled satisfactorily. However, even where complaints are a small proportion of transactions, a small percentage of a large number is still a large number and we should strive to provide excellent customer service at all times. In some areas there are issues with how services fit together with other Council systems. This can cause avoidable problems and frustrations, harm the customer experience, and lead to excess demand on the council in handling enquiries. Identifying and resolving these problems will be a key part of our strategy to improve the customer experience.

Many residents have felt that the Council was unresponsive when trying to access services, offering little information and showing little empathy to their issues often applying a 'computer says no' response. The Council needs to strengthen residents' trust by ensuring timely and effective responses, seamless customer journeys, a positive experience and ensuring a right balance between digital with more traditional channels.

The Council has a programme of activity to improve customer service but following the pandemic and with putting residents first as the new Administration's key priority, it was felt it was the right time to review how the Council provides the right experience to its customers and develop a cohesive strategy for the future.

In 2008 Access Harrow was created in to help ensure that residents had a joined-up, single point of access to Council services across all channels. The staff in Access Harrow are trained to resolve a high percentage of enquiries but is sometimes the link between the customer and the 'front-line' delivery service. Often this link is complex and can be difficult for the customer to traverse. Good, joined up technology and process are essential to smooth the customer journey as is understanding and predicting their needs.

By 2016 the Access Harrow Contact Centre was handling over a million calls and 150,000 emails per annum. Throughout the last few years that single point of access has significantly transitioned away from traditional channels such as face-to-face, email and telephony to digital with just over 95% of enquiries handled through self-service.

The Council handled over 6,000,000 enquiries throughout 2021/22 and whilst more than 5.1 million were managed through the Council's website over 600,000 telephone calls and 80,000 emails were responded to.

The strategy to move away from traditional channels was both based on changing customer trends (to move to on-line, digital channels) and on the need to manage services within a reduce budget envelope aligned to the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy

It was always recognised that some customers would not be able to interact with the Council through digital channels either as they did not have the means or the skills. Additionally, some requests of the council are more complex and require more detailed understanding and handling for which digital channels may not be suitable. For these reasons alternative options and assistance was put in place.

A set of principles has been designed in order to improve the customer experience.

Vision and Principles

This aim of the strategy is to lay out the Council's direction to improve the customer experience by putting residents first and treating both residents and businesses as valued customers.

A set of principles are proposed to underpin the strategy:

- Reduce the need for contact – be upfront and proactive when there is a problem and eliminate avoidable contacts through reducing the need to make contact in the first place through well run services.
- When a resident interacts with the Council, it will be a positive customer experience
- Ensure customers have a seamless journey through the Council for all their needs through joined-up technology, processes and information
- ensure self-service is engaging and simple to use so that digital is the channel that residents actively choose.
- Provide alternative channels where required to support people to self-serve or provide an alternative means of contact for more complex issues
- Follow up with the customer either for a progress update and to set expectations or to confirm that the request has been resolved
- Ensure that Council services are the best that they can be; focussed around the customer and built on efficient processes.
- The IT infrastructure should be centrally controlled and effectively utilised by staff to the benefit of the residents.

More details on these principles are at Appendix A.

It is proposed a costed plan is produced that will provide the detailed approach to implementing the principles. The plan will be developed within existing resources and will include:

- Business analysis including resident feedback, service feedback

- The governance and suitability of the IT infrastructure to support the proposals
- The programme of work required to implement the proposals
- Any associated costs, potential efficiencies and resident benefits
- The Equality Impact Assessment

The detailed plans will outline any associated cost of implementation and financial efficiencies which will be agreed on a case-by-case basis as part of the budget setting process for 2023/24 to ensure that there is no additional strain on the MTFS

Implications of the Recommendation

Considerations

Customer Service is the responsibility of all staff in the Council and a cultural reset is required across the organisation to ensure that improving the customer experience is an end-to-end process. Ensuring technology is joined up and introducing improvements methods, such as those used in Whole Service Review process, will be a key aspect of the programme.

Once the programme of work has been agreed the corporate governance will be set up to make certain the aims are achieved and reflected across the Council structure.

Resources, costs

The cost of the researching and producing the feasibility study will be met within existing budgets.

Staffing/workforce

The Whole Service Review process will introduce a mindset of continuous improvement to actively improve Council services.

A modular training programme around Customer Service and the Customer Experience will be put in place to develop staff skills.

The structure and governance arrangements of how the customer experience is led across the Council will be reviewed as part of this process.

Ward Councillors' comments

Not Applicable

Performance Issues

New performance measures will be agreed and reviewed to monitor improvements

Environmental Implications

There are no environmental implications associated with this report

Data Protection Implications

There are no data protection implications associated with this report.

There is an active Privacy Impact Assessment for Digital

Risk Management Implications

Risks included on corporate or directorate risk register? **YES**

“The Council provides a poor customer service” is included on the corporate risk register and rated at C3 (medium likelihood/moderate impact)

Separate risk register in place? **NO**

Are the relevant risks contained in the register are attached/summarised below? **NO**

The following key risks should be taken onto account when agreeing the recommendations in this report:

Risk Description	Mitigations	RAG Status
The strategy does not achieve its aim in improving the customer experience	<p>Commencement of Whole Service Reviews to improve service quality reduce failure demand and generate efficiencies to ensure no additional strain on the MTFS.</p> <p>Creation of Senior Level task force to drive improvements</p> <p>Roll out of detailed plans to improve customer service for specific services that have high levels of complaints</p> <p>Redesigning the current complaints process covering how the Council handles complaints</p> <p>Design of a staff training programme to improve customer service and complaint handling</p>	GREEN
The cost to introduce the strategy cannot be met within current budgets	<p>Early understanding of, and engagement on, potential costs.</p> <p>The individual business cases must identify both cost and efficiencies to ensure affordability</p> <p>Reduce or extend the scope of the strategy</p>	AMBER
Legacy Systems prevent technology from being joined up causing the standard of custom service to fall below the expected standard	<p>Devolved applications report to CSB to assess benefit of centralising IT system support</p> <p>Analysis of digital capabilities of each legacy system</p> <p>Access to range of tools (FME, web services, APIs, RPA) to link data</p>	GREEN
The cultural reset required across the Organisation to ensure that improving the customer experience is an end-to-end process fails	<p>Customer Experience modular training to be launched</p> <p>Senior management engagement and updates to the corporate board</p>	AMBER

Risk Description	Mitigations	RAG Status
leading to poor customer service.		

Procurement Implications

There are no procurement implications associated with this report

Legal Implications

Development of this strategy falls within the terms of reference of Cabinet.

Financial Implications

The cost of the feasibility study can be funded from within existing budgets.

There is no specific budget provision to support the Customer Experience Strategy. Within the strategy, it is envisaged that there will be individual business cases which will have to identify efficiencies to cover any associated costs to ensure there is no additional strain on the MTFS. Even though the business cases will be cost neutral, they need to still be considered as part of the annual budget setting process for governance purposes.

There is a risk to this strategy's introduction that funds may not be available as outlined in the risk section.

Equalities implications / Public Sector Equality Duty

A full Equality Impacts Assessment will be conducted in tandem with the options scoped out through the feasibility study.

Section 3 - Statutory Officer Clearance

Statutory Officer: Dawn Calvert

Signed by the Chief Financial Officer

Date: 1 July 2022

Statutory Officer: Jessica Farmer

Signed on behalf of the Monitoring Officer

Date: 4 July 2022

Chief Officer: Charlie Stewart

Signed by the Corporate Director

Date: 30 June 2022

Head of Procurement: Nimesh Mehta

Signed by the Head of Procurement

Date: 29 June 2022

Head of Internal Audit: Susan Dixon

Signed by the Head of Internal Audit

Date: 4 July 2022

Mandatory Checks

Ward Councillors notified: No, as it impacts on all wards

EqIA carried out: NO

A full Equality Impacts Assessment will be conducted in tandem with the options scoped out through the feasibility study.

Section 4 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact: Jonathan Milbourn, Head of Customer Services & Modernisation, jonathan.milbourn@harrow.gov.uk, tel. 020 8736 6711

Background Papers: None

Call-in waived by the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee - NO