

BARNSELEY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL (BMBC)

This matter is not a Key Decision within the council's definition and has not been included in the relevant Forward Plan.

**Report of the Director of Human Resources,
Performance and Communications**

SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH GROUP (TFG) REPORT ON 'BMBC'S CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY 2015-18'

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 To report to Cabinet the findings of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee (OSC) from the investigation undertaken on its behalf by the 'BMBC's Customer Service Strategy 2015-18' Task & Finish Group (TFG) to review the strategy and the work being carried out, as well as make recommendations for improvements.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 **That Cabinet considers the conclusions and recommendations set out in section 6 as a result of the TFG's review of BMBC's Customer Service Strategy 2015-18 and the work being undertaken.**

3. Introduction/Background

- 3.1 This TFG was established to consider the Council's Customer Service Strategy 2015-18 and the Council's aspiration to become a customer focused organisation. The strategy lays out the vision and objectives for change in the way the Council engages with its customers. This includes enhancing our online offer to enable customers to access services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; promoting self-reliance, but whilst continuing to support those who need our help.
- 3.2 To achieve the changes, the Council will actively promote and provide an improved range of online contact methods, supported by redesigned telephone services whilst still retaining face to face contact by appointment. The service will also continue to ask for customer feedback and use this to make improvements.
- 3.3 The members of the TFG who undertook this investigation included: Councillor Ralph Sixsmith (TFG Lead Member), Councillor Alice Cave, Councillor Jeff Ennis, Councillor Harry Spence, Councillor Sarah Tattersall, Councillor Joe Unsworth together with Co-opted Member Mr John Winter.

4. What the Task & Finish Group (TFG) looked at

- 4.1 Initially, the TFG met to consider the strategy and establish some key lines of enquiry to investigate with relevant officers. This included discussing the potential implications of the strategy, how this may impact on our communities and what considerations need to be taken into account to ensure effective customer services are delivered to our communities.

- 4.2 The TFG undertook a number of ‘check and challenge’ sessions with officers regarding the strategy, the work being carried out and future plans. This involved asking questions of officers regarding their work, their involvement and partnership working with other agencies as well as consideration of how these plans would affect all members of the community – particularly how it would impact on people with communication needs.
- 4.3 In addition to these sessions, Members of the TFG were also involved in: the OSC investigation into the Council’s quarterly performance regarding dealing with customer feedback including complaints and compliments; work being undertaken by the Member Development Working Group in relation to Member feedback and complaints; as well as an all member information brief (AMIB) on customer services, the Council’s website and customer feedback.

5. What the Task & Finish Group found

- 5.1 Through undertaking the ‘check and challenge’ sessions, the TFG found evidence of good practice in the work being undertaken. In particular, a comprehensive Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) had been carried out which identified the key barriers that some people face in accessing Council services and identified mitigations to minimise the impact of this (i.e. having different access channels available). The EIA outlined the need for consultation with the Equality Forums (particularly the forums who work with people who have some form of communication need) in order to better understand the barriers and issues that people face in terms of accessing services. This included establishing the variety of access channels and listing the benefits and barriers which may be experienced by different customers in using these channels. As part of this, potential solutions and mitigations had been listed which the TFG were able to contribute to.
- 5.2 The group were made aware of two Digital Champion posts that had been recruited to, to work across internal departments, with external agencies and the public, to help people use online technologies. The TFG were also provided with the Communications Implementation Plan and considered this work in detail. This evidenced a number of activities which had been undertaken to promote available online services as well as plans for future work, which again the TFG were able to contribute to.
- 5.3 Through the different work undertaken as part of the TFG, it was evident the service had worked with key stakeholders to facilitate the effective implementation of this strategy. A number of new procedures had recently been put in place, such as a corporate complaints and compliments service which required further time to embed in order to make improvements. However, the group were assured that the aim is to encourage learning from customer feedback across all services leading to improvements in service delivery.
- 5.4 The TFG acknowledged that the implementation of the strategy would be on-going and that there would be some key challenges to its implementation including: the behaviour change required from officers, Elected Members and residents in terms of self-serving and using online facilities; ensuring that all officers are aware of their responsibility to deliver excellent customer services and not just the customer

service team; also that the Council has reducing capacity but growing demand for services.

6. Recommendations

6.1 During the investigations, the TFG members made a number of suggestions and recommendations regarding the work being undertaken which the services were able to consider as part of their work programme. This included the service learning from practice in other areas the TFG were aware of, such as the 'Digital Angels' project undertaken by Wakefield District Housing. In addition to these suggestions, the TFG recommend the following:

6.2 **Recommendation 1: To undertake a mapping exercise of IT provision across the Borough including computer and WiFi access as well as IT training support**

This will be helpful for other services across the council who will be able to both contribute to this work as well as use it for their agendas. Once this is completed, services need to ensure this is disseminated across the Council as well as to partnership agencies and our communities.

6.3 **Recommendation 2: Seek feedback from both internal and external customers regarding customer feedback processes**

To ensure the continued improvement of services, it is important that the Customer Feedback and Improvement Team seek feedback and learn from officers involved in handling enquires, customers making them and other local residents, to ensure that the views and opinions expressed are representative of the diverse community. This is to help ensure processes are as effective as possible for handling enquiries.

6.4 **Recommendation 3: Facilitate feedback from Members regarding frequently asked questions (FAQs) they receive**

Currently, FAQs to Members are not recorded. However, by capturing these, they could be used to populate the Council's website as well as be circulated to other Members and used as part of Member development processes to assist with handling customer queries.

6.5 **Recommendation 4: Need to make sure all types of customer access channels are maintained**

The TFG are conscious that there are varying costs for different contact routes to the Council, however the Council has a responsibility (outlined within the Equality Act 2010) to ensure it is accessible to all members of the community. It is therefore important that there are a variety of access channels available to facilitate this, for example the availability of a text service for Deaf customers. It is acknowledged that face to face provision is the most expensive access channel; however Members recommend that there is still some opportunity to support customers in this way – based on individual needs and circumstances. It is also important to keep an open dialogue with the Equality Forums to ensure that the access channels appropriately meet the access needs of all members of the local community.

6.6 **Recommendation 5: Service to increasingly use videos to explain how to use services**

To enable access to information for all our communities, in particular for those with communication needs (for example non-English or limited-English speakers, Deaf

People and those with Learning Difficulties), the TFG supports the creation of videos to enable this. The TFG recommends that college students, for example those undertaking media qualifications could be given the opportunity to participate in this work. This will provide opportunities for skill development in the Borough as well as incorporating the perspective of young people in the designs.

6.7 Recommendation 6: An update on this work is provided to the OSC/TFG in 6 months

As this work will be on-going and there have been recent changes made to processes which require time to embed, the TFG recommend that they receive an update on progress via the OSC.

7. Implications for local people / service users

7.1 The strategy and accompanying documents identify a variety of available access channels to the Council which have both benefits and barriers depending on individual customers. Plans and solutions to mitigate barriers have been identified (within the EIA) which will require effective planning, consultation and implementation to ensure they are fit for purpose. Due to reducing resources as well as changes in customer expectations to contact the Council 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, it is important work is done to encourage and support customer self-service and online access where they can, with the opportunity for additional support in circumstances where this is needed.

8. Financial implications

8.1 There are no specific financial implications, although in responding to the recommendations in the report, the financial implications of these would need to be fully assessed by the appropriate services responding.

9. Employee implications

9.1 There are no specific employee implications, although in responding to the recommendations in the report, the employee implications of these would need to be fully assessed by the appropriate services responding.

10. Communications implications

10.1 A communication plan has been developed for the implementation of the strategy which the TFG have contributed to. It is important that effective communication with customers continues to be undertaken, in particular to promote online self-service facilities as well as provide other access channels as appropriate. In support of the recommendations, it is important that knowledge of the IT facilities available within the Borough are promoted across organisations and to residents.

11. Consultations

11.1 Consultations have taken place with Councillors Sixsmith (TFG Lead Member), Cave, Ennis, Spence, Tattersall, Unsworth, Co-opted Member John Winter and Council Officers Ann O'Flynn, Hazel Shaw, Katie Rogers and the Senior Management Team.

12. The Corporate Plan and the Council's Performance Management Framework

- 12.1 One of the Council's strategic priorities is to have 'Strong and Resilient Communities'. Within this, 'Outcome 12' focuses on ensuring 'customers can contact us easily and use more services online'. Implementation of the Customer Service Strategy 2015-18, learning from customer feedback and designing different and innovative services will help to reduce the dependency on Council as it operates with reduced resources.

13. Risk management issues

- 13.1 This matter relates directly to risk 3514 ('Failure to be able to deliver the ambitions and outcomes associated with the Customer Services Organisation Programme [CSO]') which is current logged in the Council's Strategic Risk Register as an 'amber' risk.
- 13.2 The outcomes of the TFG's consideration of matters relating to the ambitions of the Council to 'channel shift' customers to engage with the Council in more modern and often more cost effective ways will be considered further when this risk is reviewed as part of the bi-annual review of the SRR.
- 13.3 The outcomes of that review will be reported to the Audit Committee and Cabinet in April and May 2016 respectively.

14. Health, safety, and emergency resilience issues

- 14.1 Making Council information available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week makes it easier to access and therefore supports us in responding to the public in an emergency, as well as assisting with early intervention to prevent escalation of incidents. It is therefore important that we improve the IT skills and access to online information across our communities.

15. Promoting equality, diversity, and social inclusion

- 15.1 The strategy and accompanying EIA recognise the range of channels by which the public can access Council services. Work has been undertaken with equality forums and other stakeholders to understand the benefits and barriers to certain channels and work required to minimise the impact of changes to access channels. The TFG highlighted that in order to ensure we are able to support all our customers we need to maintain a variety of access channels.

16. Glossary

AMIB – All Member Information Brief
BMBC – Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
EIA – Equality Impact Assessment
OSC – Overview and Scrutiny Committee
TFG – Task and Finish Group

17. Background papers

- BMBC's Customer Service Strategy (Cab.9.9.2015/12):
<http://barnsleymbc.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s3531/Customer%20Services%20Strategy%20Appendix%201.pdf>
- BMBC's Customer Service Strategy Equality Impact Assessment (Cab.9.9.2015/12):
<http://barnsleymbc.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s3532/Customer%20Services%20Strategy%20Appendix%202.pdf>

Officer Contact: Anna Morley Telephone No: 01226 775794 Date: 26th February 2016

Financial Implications /
Consultation



MARK WOOD

25 February 2016

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(To be signed by senior Financial Services officer
where no financial implications)