

BARNSELY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT OF: EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CORE SERVICES

TITLE: OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (OSC) TASK AND FINISH GROUP (TFG) REPORT ON CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE OF BMBC

REPORT TO:	CABINET
Date of Meeting	22nd March 2023
Cabinet Member Portfolio	NA
Key Decision	No
Public or Private	Public

Purpose of report

To report to Cabinet the findings of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee (OSC) from the investigations undertaken on its behalf by the Customer Experience Task & Finish Group (TFG).

Council Plan priority

Enabling Barnsley

Recommendations

That Cabinet:-

- 1. Review the membership of the Customer Experience & Digital Board to better reflect front-line service contact.**
- 2. Develop corporate timescales for responses to all customer contact.**
- 3. Improve guidance provided on calls to give customers better information regarding service request resolutions.**
- 4. Develop systems which provide automated updates to customers regarding their service request and its completion.**
- 5. Undertake geographical analysis of compliment and complaint data.**
- 6. Enhance performance information provided to services on their compliments and complaints.**

- 7. Make providing customer feedback more accessible on the Council's website.**
- 8. Members and officers to be ambassadors of local library services.**
- 9. Area Teams officers to receive library staff training.**
- 10. Remind employees of customers with additional needs and increase the use of 'Easy Read' documents.**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 As part of its work programme the OSC agreed to undertake a TFG investigation into 'what it's like to be a customer of Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council (BMBC)'. This included focusing on BMBC's Customer Experience Strategy 2021-2024, its subsequent action plans and key performance indicators (KPIs) to determine whether the Council offers a high quality, customer driven service to all sections of the community, including those who are 'hard to reach'.
- 1.2 The Customer Experience Strategy outlines the way the Council will seek to support its customers in accessing the many services that it offers. There is an increasing emphasis on transacting digitally, driven by both resource availability as well as customer expectations. Success is defined as communities knowing how to contact the Council and access services, through which they will have an excellent experience, thus limiting avoidable contact and enabling the Council to concentrate scarce resources where they are needed most.
- 1.3 The TFG sought to better understand the various aspects to this work; to hear the views from a number of different key representatives; and consider what recommendations could be made for improvements. As a result of the investigation, the group have highlighted a number of recommendations in support of further improvement, the rationale for which is outlined in section 6 of this report.
- 1.4 The members of the TFG who undertook this investigation are as follows:
Cllrs Peter Fielding (TFG Lead Member), Sue Bellamy, Dickie Denton, Jeff Ennis, Jake Lodge, Pauline McCarthy and Kath Mitchell.

2. SCOPE OF THE INVESTIGATION & SUBSEQUENT FINDINGS

What the Task & Finish Group Looked At

- 2.1 Initially the TFG met to consider the scope of the investigation. This included sharing their own experiences and those of constituents in contacting the Council. The group discussed the importance of an overview of the Customer Experience Strategy and key areas of work. This included speaking to those who provide front line customer service, both formally and informally, as well as hearing from those with additional needs and their experiences of contacting the Council. The group were also keen to understand what data is available in terms of customer feedback, what is said and how this is used.
- 2.2 The group agreed to hold a series of meetings on the topics raised as well as

arrange a site visit to meet those who provide front-line service delivery, as well as to meet with local equality forum members to hear their perspective on this work. The TFG undertook a number of 'check and challenge' sessions with officers and key stakeholders regarding the work being carried out, future plans and key challenges. This involved asking questions of them regarding their work, their involvement, and the impact of this on the borough and its residents. This included:

- Meeting with the Council's Service Director for Customer Information & Digital Services, Head of Service for Continual Service Improvement and Customer Experience Manager, regarding an overview of the Customer Experience Strategy and the operation of the Council's Central Contact Centre;
- Meeting with the Council's Service Director for Business Improvement, Human Resources (HR) & Communications, Head of Business Improvement, and Customer Resolution Manager, to hear about how the Council records, responds to and learns from customer compliments and complaints;
- Undertaking a site visit to Barnsley Central Library @ the Lightbox to meet the Council's Head of Libraries, Strategic Development Manager, Strategic Operational Delivery Manager, and Operations Manager, to understand the customer support provided in libraries;
- Meeting with the Council's Head of Service for Stronger Communities as well as a number of Area Managers and Community Development Officers from the Council's Area Teams, to learn of their experiences as front-line officers who frequently pick up ad-hoc enquiries from customers;
- Attending a meeting of the My Barnsley Too (disability forum), to hear about their experiences as customers of Barnsley Council who have additional needs, and how they find accessing services;
- Finally, a meeting to discuss the TFG's findings and consider the associated Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats to highlight in this report.

What the Task and Finish Group Found

- 2.3 Council officers provided an overview of the Council's Customer Experience Strategy. The TFG welcomed the change in language to 'Digital by Choice' rather than 'Digital by Default', recognising that not all customers are digitally enabled. However, for those that are, web content can assist people, including those with additional needs, in accessing information. The officers explained the governance of monitoring the strategy through the 'Customer Experience and Digital Board', which has representation from officers across the Council. The board monitors the performance of the Council's Contact Centre which provides telephony, web chat, and email contact for customers to access Council Services (such as adult social care, highways, waste, registrars) as well as the Council's Arms-Length Management Organisation (ALMO) Berneslai Homes who look after the Council's Housing Stock (taking their calls for repairs, rent queries etc.).
- 2.4 TFG members considered the performance of the contact centre against the Service Level Agreements (SLAs) in place as well as the associated improvement plan which puts the customer at the heart of service delivery as shown in the diagram below:



- 2.5 The group acknowledged and welcomed the Contact Centre improvement work done to consider benchmarking and best practice from both the public and private sectors. The group recognised the challenges the Contact Centre faced, along with other Council departments in terms of recruitment and retention of staff, and the impact this had on performance. Although the TFG didn't meet directly with staff from the Council's Finance Service, they are aware they have a separate call centre working to different SLAs which handles calls relating to financial queries such as benefits and taxation, but which results in a lack of consistency in customer experience. The discussion led to highlighting the absence of any corporate standards with regards to answering emails and telephone calls, which again creates disparity in customer experience.
- 2.6 One of the areas the TFG were keen to explore was the ability of systems to provide customers with an automated update regarding their service request. The group acknowledge that this relies on system development as well as officers in services to input updates. However, the group advised that the lack of availability of this was a frustration felt by them and their constituents and resulted in a number of repeat calls, with customers chasing updates on service requests. The service advised that this provision was being trialled with reporting fly-tipping; however, there was further work to be done to make this effective. Similarly, the group queried information provided to customers on calls regarding the service they could expect if they reported something. Officers advised that guidance was agreed with services, such as timescales for a resolution; however, further work was being undertaken in this area.
- 2.7 The group welcomed the developments the Council had made in terms of utilising digital technologies, such as the 'pin on a map' function to report problems. However, having used this service, Members advised that the map function was not always accurate, and shared concerns that this might put customers off using this function in future. The TFG acknowledge the challenges officers face in keeping up with the latest developments in technology and making this available within Council operations, given the constraints on public sector resources.
- 2.8 The following meeting of the TFG provided opportunity to hear about customer feedback, including from complaints and compliments, and how this is used to

improve services. The group welcomed the work being done to resolve complaints at the earliest opportunity and avoid repeats. Work is being done with services to look at trends as well as undertake proactive work to avoid complaints, for example to communicate with residents in advance when the Council is aware there will be an unavoidable disruption to a service. The group acknowledged the increased resource which had been put into this service area, recognising the important focus on customer service.

- 2.9 Officers highlighted the work being undertaken as a result of feedback from the Local Government Ombudsman with regards to the Council's handling of complaints. This includes ensuring complaints are investigated thoroughly and that root causes are identified and remedied. The TFG welcomed the improvements in timescales in response to complaints. Also, acknowledging the increasing complexity of a number of complaints and reduced resources in services for delivery.
- 2.10 The TFG considered the various ways the data was analysed including the lower number of compliments compared with complaints. The group discussed the importance of learning from compliments as well as complaints and highlighted the challenges they had experienced in reporting these on the Council's website. The group also acknowledged the challenges of feedback given via social media and that the Council didn't have the resources to capture all of this; however, where possible, links were provided to customers should they wish to formalise their feedback.
- 2.11 The next meeting of the group provided opportunity to undertake a site visit to Barnsley Central Library @ the Lightbox. During this, the group were given an overview of service provision in Barnsley libraries. This included the group being able to view facilities available to support customer access to services, including digital support, telephone access to the contact centre, as well as appointments for those who had exhausted other contact routes, who had more complex queries. It was noted that only 6 library locations are able to offer appointments due to a lack of space. However, the group were pleased to hear that work was being done to introduce booths so that this could be offered in all libraries.
- 2.12 The group welcomed knowledge of the training provided to libraries staff to help resolve customer queries, including on financial matters. By having this training it was noted that this would aid in the consistency of messages to customers. Officers advised that they hold liaison meetings with colleagues in Finance regarding the queries they have received in libraries. This sharing of feedback is then used to redefine services and help make improvements.
- 2.13 The group considered the variety of services available at local libraries and the likely lack of knowledge about them in local communities. The group discussed a number of ways in which libraries could be better utilised in local communities, particularly given their accessibility for customers with additional needs.
- 2.14 Given the TFG members' relationships with employees in the Council's Area Teams who lead on community development activities, the group were acutely aware of the number of ad-hoc queries dealt with by these officers. The group arranged to hear from a range of officers involved with area teams to understand their perspective on customer services at the Council. The officers highlighted that as they are well

known and have a presence both physically and online in communities, they have developed trusted relationships, which results in people being more likely to come to them for support with finding information. For some areas, this is linked to the physical location of the officers who are based in buildings which historically were public facing and so some constituents still think they're open for this purpose, or alternatively have approached officers out on lunch breaks or at events in the community. The TFG appreciated that the officers recognise the importance of 'making every contact count' and will support residents whenever they can, particularly as this can avoid crisis and change an individual's negative opinion of the Council. One officer gave an example of in responding to an un-related ad-hoc query, this had led to a constituent becoming engaged in local volunteering activities. However, the group acknowledged that a lot of face to face requests for support or guidance are not reported.

- 2.15 The officers highlighted the complexity of navigating Council services, due to it being a large multi-faceted organisation. The officers gave a number of examples of both residents and officers from partner agencies struggling to locate information on the Council's website. Similarly, a number of repeat queries being made as a result of updates not being provided to customers following requests for a service. The group discussed the range of ability in terms of digital skills in communities and the need to recognise that just because an individual uses social media online, does not necessarily mean they have the ability and confidence to complete an online transaction such as completing an e-form. The officers did highlight that, where possible, they act as digital champions and will support individuals to use their smart phone to access services and for example save the location on the individual's phone so they can self-serve in future.
- 2.16 In undertaking their work, the Area Teams are particularly aware of the importance of local communications and localised activities. The officers highlighted how communities prefer to have specific arrangements for their local area and are more likely to attend such events rather than 'borough-wide' availability. Examples were given of sessions put on to support local residents, such as by Digital Champions, which are better advertised as dates in a local area only, rather than all sessions being made available across the borough. Similarly, constituents are likely to be interested in events at their local library but would be unlikely to follow a social media page which covers all libraries.
- 2.17 The penultimate meeting of the group was attending a 'My Barnsley Too' (disability forum) meeting. This gave the TFG opportunity to hear about the experiences of customers of Barnsley Council who have additional needs, and how they find accessing services. The majority of the group advised that they do not have smart phones and rely on word of mouth/leaflets/support workers to access services. For those that are online, they advised that they find it challenging when it takes lots of 'clicks' to get to particular locations on websites. Also, the officers highlighted that QR codes are often a preferred method of accessing information for forum members as it takes them straight to the information they need.
- 2.18 The TFG welcomed knowledge that officers supporting the forum produced bulletins with key information, which was shared with forum members, both to those online, as well as face to face for those attending forum meetings, which helped to keep them informed of local events and important updates.

2.19 Examples of both positive and negative experiences were given of accessing Council services by forum members, which highlighted the importance of officers being mindful of all Council customer needs. Positive feedback was received from a number of forum members who were happy that they could contact the Council by telephone and were confident that their request for service would be put through to the correct department and resolved. TFG members were keen to support those with additional needs to access services and encouraged forum members to utilise their local councillors. Forum members highlighted how during the pandemic, a lot of information had been provided in an 'easy read' version which they found particularly helpful. This was not only useful to them but could be utilised to give information for those where English is an additional language.

2.20 Officers and 'My Barnsley Too' members were keen that the forum was utilised as two-way communication for the development and improvement of Council services. Recent experience had shown that as forum members had been engaged in the development of the 'More Money In Your Pocket' website to provide assistance for residents as a result of the cost of living crisis, the information had been made easily accessible from the start and avoided a lengthy process to correct it at the end. Thus highlighting the need for the Council to be mindful of and engaged with all its communities, particularly those with additional needs when accessing services.



2.21 The final meeting of the group provided opportunity to reflect on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats highlighted throughout the investigation. As a result, a number of key recommendations were identified by the group and are reflected in section 6 of this report.

2.22 The TFG would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who provided information, attended meetings, and assisted with the TFG's investigation; it is much appreciated. Particular thanks are given to My Barnsley Too forum members for allowing the group to attend one of their meetings and gather invaluable insights into their experiences as customers of BMBC.

3. IMPLICATIONS OF THE DECISION

3.1 Financial and Risk

There are no specific financial implications or risks associated with the report, although in responding to the recommendations in the report, the financial and risk implications of these would need to be fully assessed by the appropriate services responding. Consultations have taken place with representatives of the Director of Finance (S151 Officer).

3.2 Legal

There are no specific legal implications, although in responding to the recommendations in the report, the legal implications of these would need to be fully assessed by the appropriate services responding. Consultations have taken place with the Service Director for Law & Governance.

3.3 Equality

The TFG is keen to ensure that all Council operations and activities are considerate of the needs of all its communities. The TFG acknowledge the importance of people with additional needs being supported to both access Council services as well as give feedback on their experiences. As highlighted in section 6 of this report, the group have made a number of recommendations in support of this.

3.4 Sustainability

As this report does not require a decision, the sustainability decision-making wheel has not been included.

3.5 Employee

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.

3.6 Communications

As highlighted in the findings and recommendations of the investigation, effective communication is critical to ensuring a positive customer experience. The TFG frequently found that avoidable contact is being received due to customers not being updated on the progress of their service request; therefore, a number of the recommendations in this report reflect this. The TFG are also keen to better promote services and would in particular welcome expansion of communications activities in relation to services available in local libraries.

4. CONSULTATION

4.1 Consultations have taken place with: Customer Experience TFG members, OSC members, the Council's Cabinet members, Council officers from the Core Services, and Public Health & Communities Directorates, Equality Forum Officers and Members, and the Council's Senior Management Team.

5. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

5.1 No alternative options have been considered in the writing of this report.

6. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Overview and Scrutiny is a statutory function in local government to enable Councillors to provide 'critical friend' challenge of local services and make recommendations to drive improvements.

6.2 The recommendations in this report are made as a result of the OSC's Customer Experience TFG undertaking a detailed investigation into how the Council interacts with its customers and how effective this is. The TFG were reassured by the amount of work being done in this area and have made the following recommendations in order to support the continual improvement of services.

6.3 **Recommendation 1: Review the membership of the Customer Experience & Digital Board to better reflect front-line service contact**

As highlighted in the findings of the TFG, there are a number of front-line officers frequently dealing with face to face queries from the public, which are not necessarily being recorded in Council activity. The group recommend that this is addressed so that intelligence can be shared regarding queries and identify if there are any trends. The TFG considered ways this could possibly be done, either through having individual representatives on the board and/or developing panels to gather feedback from relevant individuals which is then fed back to the Board. Elected Member involvement in this feedback would also be helpful as Councillors are often contacted when things go wrong and are regular 'customers' themselves.

6.4 **Recommendation 2: Develop corporate timescales for responses to all customer contact**

During the investigation the TFG came across numerous examples where an absence of corporate standards for responses resulted in a lack of consistency in the 'Customer Experience'. This is not just in call centre functions, but in Council-wide customer contact. The TFG acknowledged the discrepancies specifically in Council call centre SLAs which they feel should be resolved, and consideration should be given to the combination of the call-centre functions. Work will also need to be undertaken to develop approaches to monitor and report on compliance.

6.5 **Recommendation 3: Improve guidance provided on calls to give customers better information regarding service request resolutions**

On a number of occasions it was noted that a lack of information provided to customers resulted in avoidable repeat contacts. Therefore, the TFG would welcome guidance used in the contact centre to be reviewed to provide more information on what customers should expect in terms of a resolution to their request and timescales, and this should be available for a larger number of queries. As systems develop, the group would welcome targets being set to minimise repeat contacts.

6.6 **Recommendation 4: Develop systems which provide automated updates to customers regarding their service request and its completion**

Linked with the previous recommendation, the TFG are keen to prevent avoidable contact to the Council which is occurring both to the Contact Centre as well as to

front line officers receiving ad-hoc queries. The group appreciate the challenges in developing this; however, would welcome greater automation in systems providing email/text message updates to customers on their service request and notification of its completion. This should be followed by an invitation to complete a satisfaction survey, with the aim of collecting data where neither a formal compliment or complaint has been made.

6.7 Recommendation 5: Undertake geographical analysis of compliment and complaint data

During discussions the group were keen to understand where compliments and complaints are being received from across the borough and whether there are any trends which could potentially need to be addressed. This might also highlight areas of excellent performance in particular areas which services could learn from.

6.8 Recommendation 6: Enhance performance information provided to services on their compliments and complaints

The TFG were keen that services were aware of and addressing any trends in customer feedback. The group were advised that information was provided to services categorised as issues with e.g. a process and procedure, or workforce or communication. Also, the feedback was broken down by teams. However, the group felt there was an absence of granular detail such as a pattern of e.g. missed bins or a particular planning process. Additionally, as part of enhancing the information, the TFG felt it would be helpful to play back calls which have been handled by the Contact Centre to bring some of the feedback to life, so services have a richer understanding of customer feedback to act upon.

6.9 Recommendation 7: Make providing customer feedback more accessible on the Council's website

The group experienced difficulty in locating where to provide customer feedback on the website and felt it was more geared to those providing a complaint rather than encouraging compliments. Throughout the investigation it was evident that a number of customer compliments are being missed which are given to officers and Councillors which it would be helpful to capture, and individuals should be encouraged to facilitate this.

6.10 Recommendation 8: Members and officers to be ambassadors of local library services

In undertaking the investigation, the TFG were made aware of a number of services and activities in libraries. This included support to access council services as well as activities for such as Story and Rhyme sessions and Lego clubs. The TFG are keen that libraries are better utilised, such as to involve residents in consultations. Also that libraries and relevant activities are better promoted, for example through providing information to Ward Alliances to put information on their social media pages.

6.11 Recommendation 9: Area Teams officers to receive library staff training

The TFG acknowledged that area teams officers who work out in Barnsley communities are frequently responding to ad-hoc queries from customers. In order to improve their knowledge as well as improve consistency of information provided to customers, they would welcome receipt of library staff training.

6.12 Recommendation 10: Remind employees of customers with additional needs

and increase the use of 'Easy Read' documents

In hearing from the My Barnsley Too (disability forum) members, the group were reminded of the challenges some constituents face in accessing Council services. Given some of the experiences shared by forum members, the group would like to remind all employees to be mindful of supporting customers with additional needs. In particular, where possible it would be helpful to increase the use of 'Easy Read' versions of documents which would also help those where English is an additional language. Additionally, as technology develops in Council call centres, it would be helpful if case management systems could alert call handlers when customers may have previously disclosed that they have a disability and may need additional support in order to resolve and assist them with their query.

7. GLOSSARY

ALMO	Arms-Length Management Organisation
BMBC	Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
HR	Human Resources
OSC	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
SLA	Service Level Agreement
TFG	Task and Finish Group

8. LIST OF APPENDICES

There are no appendices for this report.

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Barnsley Council Customer Experience Strategy 2021-2024

<https://www.barnsley.gov.uk/media/19929/customer-experience-strategy-2021-2024-final.pdf>

If you would like to inspect background papers for this report, please email governance@barnsley.gov.uk so that appropriate arrangements can be made.

10. REPORT SIGN OFF

Financial consultation & sign off	Senior Financial Services officer consulted and date <i>Avanda Mitchell</i> 09.03.23
Legal consultation & sign off	Legal Services officer consulted and date <i>Sukdave Ghuman</i> 13.02.23

Report Author: Anna Marshall

Post: Scrutiny Officer

Date: 9th March 2023