

Report to Stronger Communities Select Committee

Date of meeting: 22 March 2022

Portfolio: Customer & Partnerships Services

Subject: Customer Service Update

Officer contact for further information: Susan Lewis

Democratic Services Officer: R Perrin



Recommendations/Decisions Required:

To note the update on 'what our customers are telling us' plus an update on our Customer strategy.

1 What our customers are telling us

The impact of storm Eunice saw residents contacting us due to lost waste bins and missed waste collections. Also relating to the storms, residents called to report fallen trees/branches on the highway, positive feedback was received for how swiftly these calls were dealt with.

Customers are chasing orders for blue boxes due to a supplier issue, stock will be available from April, this has been communicated via our website and via our phone message to the contact centre. Positive messages are being left on our website regarding the Ukraine Crisis collection point at the Civic hub.

2 Contact Centre & Community Hub Update

Customer Contact Centre

Two new starters joined the contact centre in February and are currently undergoing their training. To ensure our new colleagues can take customer calls as soon as possible we have introduced a skills based routing system which means as soon as they have completed each stage of their training they are then able to assist with taking calls for those service areas.

Contact Centre Benchmarking

We have been conducting a benchmarking exercise for our contact centre operating model in terms of resourcing, performance, systems and KPI's with other Local Authorities of a comparable size. Key messages from this exercise will be communicated in due course as they are being collated via the Pan Essex customer service group.

We recently met with Buckinghamshire Council for an overview of their digital journey. Learnings regarding the implementation of their new telephony platform will prove useful for our telephony project which is included further on in this report. Buckinghamshire also shared details of some of their contact centre tools which could be of benefit, we are exploring the feasibility as part of our digital strategy.

Community Hub Launch

We are seeing an increase in footfall this quarter since a decline in visitors in the previous quarter. Some Hub partners have revisited the marketing material we provided and are recirculating this via their social media platforms to encourage footfall as well as using their own material. We are also looking to promote The Hub via the United In Kind Radio station, a digital radio streaming platform sharing messages of kindness and connecting communities across Essex.

3 Customer Service Strategy - 2022/23 overview

The core vision for our digital strategy is to use digital to deliver the services our customers want whilst driving down our cost. Stream one of our digital strategy focusses on our customers, residents, businesses and visitors to provide them with digital services they will use by default, whilst at the same time recognising others may still require additional support whether that's face to face or a phone call.

We have started by reaching out to customers to capture their insight and feedback as follows via:

Online engagement surveys and focus groups – both virtual and face to face

We have been asking for feedback on their digital habits in general, how they communicate with us, what the barriers are to interacting with us via digital and we have invited them to work with us ongoing to shape the strategy. Early stage messages tell us that our customers are well connected digitally, 90% shop or bank online.

As stated, we appreciate not all residents use digital methods, as part of our customer engagement, contact details for VAEF have been included in the communication inviting customers to get in contact should they wish to access support with using digital tools.

Causation data from incoming customer calls

We have been asking customers who call us why they needed to call, again to understand what the barriers are to them serving themselves at their convenience online. Customers were prompted to select a category, the results of which are shown below.

| Reasons for calling | Total calls | % of calls |
|--|-------------|------------|
| Couldn't find information on website | 1133 | 23 |
| In depth discussion required | 1001 | 21 |
| Chasing non-response to previous contact | 944 | 19 |
| Didn't know can self -serve | 737 | 15 |
| No access to internet | 474 | 10 |

(data was captured from Dec 21 to Feb 22 for a total of 4,760 calls)

What's next

We are setting up a corporate working group to address the key messages and identify improvements required. Service areas have been provided with their specific data from the call causation and those six areas with the highest volumes are providing a stream lead to join the working group to support delivery of this work within their teams. Capacity in terms of resourcing this improvements work is to be agreed.

Our website

Early stage customer feedback from our survey tells us that most people think the website is presented in plain English (92%) and the design provides good readability (89%). Although, nearly two thirds of respondents think information is presented in a clear and structured way, the negative responses suggest there is clearly some room for improvement.

When it comes to finding information, we have some issues. The feedback tells us that we have work to do on the search facility and specific feedback identifies that our online forms need developing to ensure a consistent look and feel with improvements to aid completion. We have a website improvements project on our service plan for this year

Mystery shopper

Our aim is to run a mystery shopper exercise in quarter one to further obtain feedback on our customer experience using an external consultancy.

Digital inclusion

There is a strong appetite amongst partners and voluntary organisations to adopt a collaborative approach to digital inclusion and our role is to facilitate this working group. The group met in January to resume discussions, following the initial meeting last August, it was placed on hold due to lack of a Team Manager.

The groups purpose will be to

- Connect, collaborate and identify how they can help each other
- Facilitate access to training, venues, hardware/devices
- Promote via our communication tools the support available to our residents
- Enable digitally excluded residents to access the support they need

Our starting point is to produce a directory of support available across our district for coaching support and access to hardware, plus partner initiatives. A great example of an initiative offered by WECAN (West Essex Community Action Network) as part of their Digital Inclusion project, is the provision of free six-month, Vodafone sim and data cards. WECAN also run a TEC Mates programme designed to support the use of digital technology with volunteers teaching new digital skills to residents.

Our role is to connect and promote. Through connections with our Community Hub partners, such as DWP we have been able to identify residents who could benefit most from the sim card data and digital skills learning. Once we have a clear plan in place of what support is available, we will be promoting and raising awareness via our social media channels.

Members digital journey

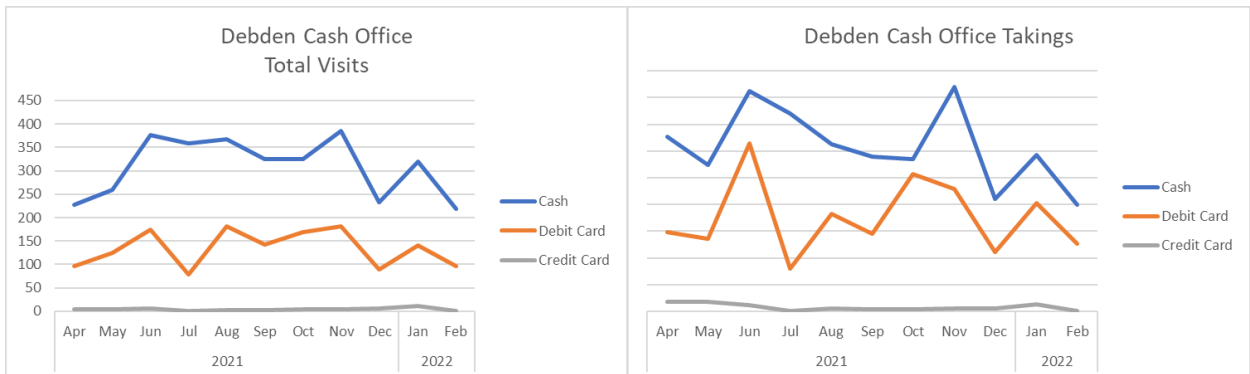
Good progress has been made in the development of a series of digital 'how to' guides being designed in collaboration with Member Support, Democratic Services & ICT. The guides are currently being user tested and are due to be distributed to Members with accompanying tutorial videos in April. The guides will provide Members with the ability to reset their own passwords, access the Members Portal and utilise the Member Contact Form as well as setting up Multi-Function Authentication to support 'bring your own device'.

Members have been contacted and invited to attend a one to one with Lisa Bannister-Wood, Members Team Manager to identify and resolve any barriers to working in a digital manner. Lisa can be contacted directly via email to L.BannisterWood@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

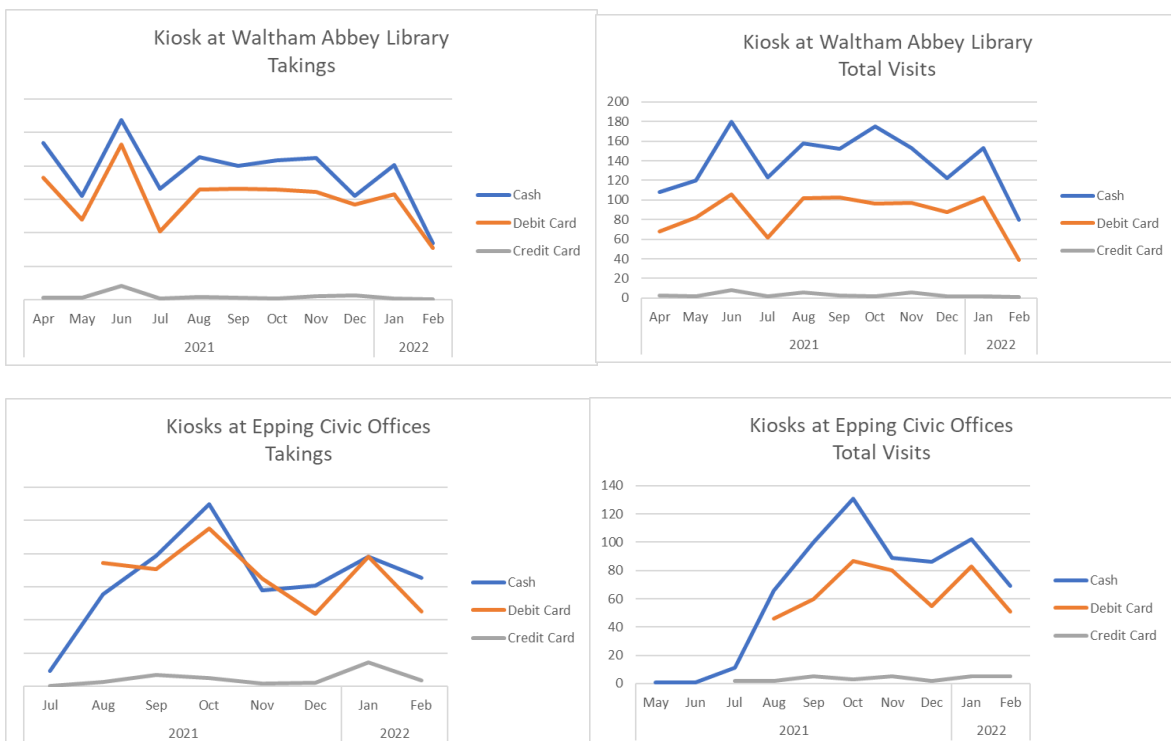
Cash payments

A paper on proposals for cash paying customers moving forwards will be presented in conjunction with a Housing report as both reports impact the future of the Broadway office. Date and meeting for these reports are TBC but will be within the next few months.

Visits to the Debden Cash Office are down 27% over the last three months compared to the previous, with income also down 29%.



We've seen a similar pattern at the payment kiosks, with Waltham Abbey Library and Civic Offices kiosk visits down 25% and 18% respectively, and income down 26% and 20%.



In Your Shoes Customer Service Behavioural Training

Following the pilots last year, this training is now ready for launch to all colleagues via our new training platform Litmus and will be launching in quarter one. As a reminder, the training provides coaching on dealing with challenging conversations, putting ourselves in customer shoes as well as a question and answer session with experienced Officers sharing their knowledge and tips.

Telephony

Last year we started to explore new telephony solutions which will address the challenges our contact centre faces with using nine different systems to deal with enquiries, which is neither effective or efficient. In addition, our analytics are very poor, the call causation data captured for our customer engagement exercise was a very long and tedious manual task.

In line with our digital strategy our aim is to offer a multi-channel experience, enabling customers and agents to move seamlessly between contact channels, introducing new channels such as live chat or a 'chat bot' for when human intervention isn't needed. Benefits include reduced wait times for those who need to speak to an agent, reduced call volumes, improved analytics and optimum agent capability. A Project Manager is now in place to lead this project supported by the Customer Service Manager.

The telephony platform will be a corporate product and requirements from all service areas have been captured. One of the issues raised via the call causation was customers chasing a lack of response to previous contact. We must address our communication ways of working, with agile working, Officers are using teams and mobile phones and not necessarily the Mitel phone system which could be attributing to calls not being connected, this is being addressed as a priority.

Corporate Communications including Digital News Platform

The communications team have been heavily involved in the launch of our customer engagement strategy via social media, setting up the surveys and running the focus groups.

Ride London is a priority as Corporate Communications seeks to provide a mixture of promotional and warn and inform messages. Communications are being handled in conjunction with London Marathon Events. Corporate Comms is also supporting CCW and Licensing as the district prepares for the Platinum Jubilee.

Covid related communications has decreased considerably. Vaccine booster messages and associated public health communications continue to be issued on a business as usual basis in partnership with health and county council services.

Corporate Communications is working in conjunction with the elections service to develop processes for the publication of results when the Civic Offices hosts the district elections count in May.

Urgent communications have been issued following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The chairman has led the Council's public response, in support of the donation hub and appeals for financial donations to the Disasters Emergency Committee, British Red Cross and United Nations funds.

Following the launch of our digital platform 'District Matters' the online app is performing well technically with no issues. Third party content is uploaded along with our key community information. Subscription is currently low, 58 as at February 22. We are exploring the potential options and will continue to monitor usage and performance in line with our other media channels.

Natalie Cole of the Corporate Communications team was invited back to stand in for the regular Absolute Radio 80s presenter on the Saturday 12-4pm slot. The invitation to stand in for a professional presenter followed Natalie's debut broadcast with Absolute and her award of her own radio programme – Absolute Radio Natalie, broadcast in February.

Website Visits

The following statistics give an overview of visits to our website for 2021 in comparison to 2020.

Visits

A visit is defined as a series of page requests from the same uniquely identified visitor with a time of no more than 30 minutes between each page request.

2021 1,024,458
2020 897,190
Increase 14.2%

Page views

A page view is a count of how many times a page has been viewed on a website or the chosen group within the chosen period of time. All page views are counted no matter how many times a user has visited the website in the chosen period of time.

2021 3,189,555
2020 3,005,341
Increase 6.1%

Unique visitors

The total number of unique visitors during the selected period. Cookies are specific to browser and device which means that if a visitor is visiting our website using a different browser or device than before, or has deleted or never accepted the cookie, then that person will be seen as a new unique visitor even if that is not the case.

2021 906,329
2020 730,139
Increase 24.1%

Devices used

2021 Desktop 58.1% / Mobile 38.8% / Tablet 3.2%
2020 Desktop 56.2% / Mobile 39.4% / Tablet 4.3%

Reason for decision: none

Options considered and rejected: none

Resource implications: none

Legal and Governance Implications: none

Safer, Cleaner, Greener Implications: none

Consultation Undertaken: customer consultation

Background Papers: none

Impact Assessments: none

Risk Management: none

Equality: customer consultation on digital usage includes contact details for digitally excluded customers requiring support