

Report to Stronger Communities Select Committee

Date of meeting: 22 September 2022

Portfolio: Customer (Cllr A Lion)

Subject: Customer Service Strategy Update

Officer contact for further information: Susan Lewis

Democratic Services Officer: R Perrin (01992 564243)



Recommendations/Decisions Required:

To note the update on our Customer Service Strategy and provide feedback on 'what our customers are telling us'.

What are our Customers telling us?

1 Members will be aware of the issues with the current Waste and Recycling contract and the number of missed collections experienced by residents in recent months. Inevitably the service that receives the initial fallout from such a service failure is the Customer Service team which manifests itself in an increased number of calls related to missed collections.

2 The Waste and Recycling and Customer Service teams have been working closely together to minimise customer calls and provide up-to-date information on-line and through social media as updates for residents. There has been an increase in calls, and it has been a challenging time for the teams involved. It is an unfortunate consequence that the increase in waste calls led to longer queue times for residents as the Customer Service Team was not resourced for the level of response required as a consequence of the waste issues.

3 There has therefore been a need to provide additional support to the Customer Service Team to improve service response times and to manage the impact on the team's welfare. There has been a recruitment process for three additional temporary staff to join the Customer Service Team to specifically handle the calls relating to missed waste collections

4 There has been a significant increase (43%) in **formal customer complaints** from April onwards relating to the ongoing waste crisis. Since April 44% (82/188) of complaints have been upheld. The majority being upheld are waste related with 75 out of 82. In addition to this increase, we have been working through our Self-Assessment for the Housing Ombudsman ensuring that we are compliant according to the Landlords Complaint Handling code in readiness for 1st October 2022.

Customer Strategy 2022/23 Update

5 The core vision for our **digital** work is to use digital to deliver the services our customers want whilst driving down our cost. We aim to provide our residents, businesses, and visitors with digital services they will use by default, whilst at the same time recognising others may still require additional support whether face to face or a phone call.

6 To date we have seen a 15% increase compared to last year in the use of **digital forms**. There has also been a 6% reduction in telephone calls over the same period. This is the direction of travel the Council needs to build on in its future digital development. Much of the increase in the use of digital forms has been through the contact centre encouraging

customers to self-serve and to promote the benefits to channel switch through social media posts.

7 Focus was given following the customer consultation that took place in March 2022 about how easy it was to use our digital services and what barriers customers met in using these services. The predominant customer feedback on the website focussed on finding what they were looking for and forms being difficult to use. Customer service and Corporate Communications are working together to improve our website; this includes an improved search facility and simpler layout. We have prioritised waste and are developing a new waste section with simplified forms and easier navigation. Options are also being explored to look at alternative platforms to make website development and support much more dynamic and efficient.

8 The provision of additional frequently asked questions and scripts has resulted in an increase in **First Point Resolution** for first six months of year from an average 46% in 2021/22 to average 67% in 2022/23. This means these additional customers are getting their contact resolved by the Customer Service team without the need for the call to be transferred to the back-office or another agency, again with the aim of increasing customer satisfaction and using our resources across the Council more efficiently.

9 Meeting one of the objectives of the Customer Service Strategy we reviewed the provision of **Cash Office at Debden Broadway**. Proposals for cash paying customers moving forwards were presented and agreed by Stronger Communities Select Committee on 12th July. We are now working towards implementing an Allpay payment solution for Council Tax and Business Rates customers with the intention to launch late October followed by closure of the Debden Cash Office in December. The new solution will provide residents and businesses an increased number of outlets and opening hours whilst providing efficiency savings for the Council of around £10,000 per annum plus the release of the building for future rental income potential.

10 On our **Digital Members** journey IT coaching sessions have been held with new and existing Members and in partnership with the ICT Service Desk who have assisted with connection to Council systems via personal devices, tablets, and smart phones (Bring Your Own Device - BYOD). ICT have produced a guide highlighting the benefits of BYOD and encourage all Members to consider whether this would be more suitable for their digital needs and style of work. Please contact the ICT Helpdesk on 01992 56488 should you wish to take advantage of this opportunity. We are currently seeing very low volumes of ICT tickets raised by Members for any issues with equipment, as a reminder if you are experiencing problems, please raise via the Member contact form, for immediate help call the ICT helpdesk.

11 Whilst our focus is on providing digital services that most of our customers will choose to use, we recognise that traditional channels will still be required by some members of our community. We continue to see a steady increase in visitors to **Epping Community Hub** on average 38% month on month especially for services that provide help & support around benefits and finance. August saw our highest volume (150) of visitors since opening September 2021. With the closure of Barclays Bank on Epping High Street, we have welcomed Barclays into the Community Hub three times a week providing non-cash transactions such as online banking support, account enquires and any other non-cash related assistance to their customers.

12 **Digital inclusion** remains an important objective to help people use digital technology in their lives and to be able to use the digital solutions we offer. We principally use our partners in the voluntary sector to help us achieve with the Council acting as the conduit and signposting people for help. A great example of an initiative offered by WECAN (West Essex Community Action Network) as part of their Digital Inclusion project was the provision of free six-month, Vodafone sim and data cards. These cards have been well received by visitors to the Community Hub in need of this support. We have started to offer digital coaching for residents in the Community Hub on a Thursday, this is being offered by VAEF and WECAN, either on an appointment basis, referral from other partners or as walk ins. The intention is to

raise further awareness via Community Champions and local Town and Parish Councils. Limes Farm will be the next venue for coaching to be offered, where we would hope there may well be a greater need and take up from residents.

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