

Minutes of a meeting of the EAP Connected Communities

At 10.00 am on Friday 19th April, 2024 in the Council Chamber, The Cube, George Street, Corby NN17 1QG

Present:-

Members

Councillor Lloyd Bunday (Chair)
Councillor Bert Jackson

Cllr John McGhee

34 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Richard Levell, Cllr Ian Jelley and Cllr Valerie Anslow. It was noted that Cllr John McGhee was acting as substitute for Cllr Anslow.

35 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

36 Minutes of the meeting held on 28th February 2024

RESOLVED that:-

The minutes of the meeting held on 28th February 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

37 Customer Service Operation Update

The Panel received a report from the Assistant Director for Customer Experience that formed an update on the Council's customer services operations following a period of transformational activity, provided information in relation to the current position of the service and sought comments and feedback from members.

The Panel was provided with details of two major service transformation projects that had been undertaken across the previous 18 month period, the first being the procurement and operation of a new, single customer relationship management (CRM) system to replace legacy systems. It was noted that the new system would allow for improved customer interactions and data capture from customer service hubs across the Council area. The introduction of the system was being phased to different service areas across the Council, with learning taken from each implementation to inform the continuous roll out of the programme. It was anticipated that rollout would be completed by October 2024.

The Panel heard that there were a number of complex system integrations remaining to be completed with a view to harmonising services and increasing the number of customer services advisors that could answer Council-wide queries. In addition, work was underway to record avoidable and unavoidable contacts to enable the Council to hold useful data for service liaison meetings, and improve services offered and customer interactions.

Details were provided of the second service transformation project, the procurement of a single cloud-based telephony system provided by 8x8. It was noted that migration from the five previous legacy systems had commenced in May 2023 and now offered a better picture of customer contacts with teams able to produce reports from calls received. The Panel noted that the new system benefitted from a multitude of options through its licence, with work underway to consider which enhancements would benefit the Council's greatest pinch points and develop better resilience across customer services advisors.

The meeting heard that customer services teams would continue to operate a hybrid-working model, with the ability for staff to work from home fed into team charter principles and also allowed advisors to work at different sites across the Council area improving service flexibility and experiences for staff.

For customers, the new telephony system would be easier to navigate, with payment systems at the front of the Interactive Voice Response options to reduce wait times. Although there remained significant work that could be undertaken with the system, resources were focussed on identifying elements that would have the greatest impact. The Panel noted that a review of the general enquiries option would be undertaken as it was the source of 40,000 calls during 2023 and was the lengthiest option to navigate to.

Cllr John McGhee stated that he had received feedback from staff that internal contact was currently difficult and that asking staff to have a full understanding of all service areas required significant training and time. Cllr McGhee also queried staffing numbers for customer services.

In response it was heard that service liaison meetings would be convened to discuss internal frustrations and performance. It was reported that waste services was now in a position to utilise data from the CRM to provide a score card for customer services, including volume of calls handled, avoidable and unavoidable contacts and feedback from staff. Details of staff numbers were provided to the meeting along with training provided.

Cllr McGhee queried whether best practice had been identified at the legacy authorities as well as other local authorities that may assist the Council in making improvement to its customer service function at a quicker rate.

The Assistant Director responded to state that a peer review of the service would take place later in 2024 and best practice examples had been identified at each of the five legacy authorities. The journeys of other authorities undergoing unitarisation had also been reviewed to shape the way the Council moved forward in this regard.

Cllr McGhee raised reservations regarding the perceived push towards online business activity for the majority of customer interactions with the Council and raised a

specific issue with regard to outstanding housing payment balances being unavailable for customers.

In response it was heard that the Council wished to offer choice to customers in their interactions with the Council and provide them with informed decisions. The Panel noted that the Council needed to understand its customer base and support those that could utilise online options by making it as simple as possible. Regarding housing payment balances, this was an issue currently being reviewed by the relevant team.

Cllr Bert Jackson raised a query regarding home working and the requirement for staff to be in the office a minimum of two days a week and whether this impacted efficiency of the service.

The Assistant Director spoke to note that having staff in the offices allowed for collaborative working and provided a beneficial support network. The Council had adopted a consistent principle around hybrid working that could support and drive good service performance.

The meeting received customer interaction performance statistics for the service for 2023. It was noted that various interactions took differing durations, from those at reception to full housing sign up meetings that lasted approximately an hour. It was noted that the bulk of interactions came through the contact centre with over 305,000 calls answered, at an answer rate of 80%. The meeting was advised that although the call answer target was missed for 2023, work was underway to improve this figure, with a specific plan to reduce abandoned calls.

The meeting noted that data collected allowed the Council to plan ahead and better understand how to effectively staff the various call volume peaks that occurred throughout the year, such as following the dispatch of Council Tax bills or in relation to school admissions. A monthly team meeting was held to examine potential risks arising from staff rostering, taking into account annual leave as well as short-term and long-term staff absence to ensure there were the appropriate resources in place to answer calls.

Cllr McGhee welcomed the allocation of resources to the service areas needed, noting the large volume of abandoned calls in 2023 and requested a breakdown of calls per service area so priorities could be better examined.

Details were provided to the meeting of training courses for staff, with specific reference to crisis calls. Details were also provided regarding a team charter that had been co-designed with the customer services team to bring together consistent working principles.

The meeting received details of the various operating customer services hubs across North Northamptonshire. Cllr McGhee raised the point that it was beneficial having customer services staff that knew areas well. Cllr McGhee also raised the issue of member enquiries and the delay in implementing support in that area.

The Assistant Director acknowledged the importance of member enquiries, noting that the resources required to build a robust system had only become available in the current year, with the need to adopt a Case Management System noted. It was heard the model being created would offer options for complaints and MP enquiries and would enable members to view caseloads via a dashboard element. User access

training for members would be required to ensure the new system met member needs. Timeframes for the system to become operational were appropriate given the complex nature of the undertaking and the current experience of the system.

Members thanked the Assistant Director for Customer Experience for the report and sought assurances that the outcome of discussions would be provided at the next meeting.

38 Forward List of Items for the EAP

The forward list of items for the EAP was considered, with Members noting that a report detailing a Draft Compliments, Comments and Complaints Policy for the Council would be submitted to the next meeting of the Panel on 21st June 2024.

39 Executive Forward Plan

The Executive Forward Plan for 1st April 2024 to 31st July 2024 was noted.

40 Close of Meeting

There being no further business, the Chair thanked Members and Officers for their attendance and closed the meeting.

Chair

Date

The meeting closed at 11.32 am