

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21 June 2023

Present: Councillor A Grimston (Chair)
Councillor F Ezeifedi (Vice-Chair)
Councillors S Ahmed, M Devonish, P Hill, A Khan, P Kloss,
T Osborn and K Rodrigues

Also present: Councillor Mark Watkin (Portfolio Holder)

Officers: Associate Director of Planning, Infrastructure and Economy
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Digital Development Manager
Customer Services Operations Manager
Associate Director of Customer and Corporate Services

1 **Apologies for Absence/Committee Membership**

There were no apologies for absence.

2 **Disclosure of interests (if any)**

There were no disclosures of interest.

3 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 March 2023 were submitted and signed.

4 **Call-in**

No call-in had been received.

5 **Customer Experience Strategy**

The committee received a report of the Customer Services Operations Manager.

The Associate Director for Customer and Corporate Services introduced the report, providing the context to the strategy, how it had been drawn together and setting out the four key themes of the strategy: service design, our people, technology and insight.

The Customer Services Operations Manager delivered a presentation to the committee which included:

- Data providing the numbers and scope of customer interactions.
- The extent to which customers were self-serving and how satisfied they were with the interactions across different contact channels.
- The implementation of the delivery plan associated with the strategy.

During discussions on the report, members raised the following areas requesting additional information where relevant:

- A benchmarking arrangement was in place with the other Hertfordshire authorities which used a consistent set of data. Watford performed well in these exercises; notably in answering phone calls and queries were dealt with efficiently. An option to receive a call back, instead of waiting on hold, had been introduced. There was confidence that the service was working well.
- It was noted that there was some confusion between the post box for the council and for the construction company; officers undertook to confirm that no correspondence had been misdirected.
- There had been no issues in relation to the renewal of the green bin service.
- Artificial intelligence (AI) would be growing in importance nationally; most notably as part of the offer provided through third party suppliers. It was not currently being actively pursued as a solution internally as officers were first keen to understand the benefits for customer experience and efficiency. The Customer Services Operations Manager had attended a conference where a local authority had relayed their experience of rolling out an AI solution for customers.
- The service was conscious of the digital divide and the council supported the Staying Connected project with W3RT. Artificial intelligence had the potential to assist with translations but face-to-face provision was also vital in that context.
- Many services had already been moved online as part of the service transformation programme which took place in 2020. There were some additional areas, which had a large number of processes but with smaller volumes, where there was potential to move to an online model. The service change process could be lengthy and depend on service demands and there was therefore not a defined timescale in place. Officers would circulate a list of areas that were under review to the committee.
- The drop in the use of online services in 2021 as compared to 2020 could be attributed to face-to-face services being largely unavailable in 2020. There was a communications plan under development with the intention

that online services would be highlighted as part of routine service communications as well as when customers contacted or visited the CSC.

- There was no specific service level agreement to provide responses to councillors but all correspondence should be responded to within ten working days.
- The increase in online transactions meant that officers had more time to deal with more complex queries, particularly for those customers who attended. People were a key aspect of the strategy and there was a dedicated training officer who provided regular training to the team. The most complex queries were passed to departmental officers in the relevant service. There was a strong team with low turnover and the move to agile working had assisted retention. Officers would provide the staff turnover level to the committee. It was noted that when staff in the Customer Service Centre did move on, this was often to other services within the council, with the CSC acting as an entry academy for the council.
- Complaints formed part of the suite of key performance indicators that were reported quarterly. Real-time information about complaints were now available to ensure that a swifter response to any underlying issues was possible.
- Councillors received complaints about communications and it was noted that 85,000 calls were received annually. An option for all callers to provide feedback was being introduced. Councillors were also an important part of that feedback loop.
- A business case was under development for the provision of proactive alerts. A clear benefit to the council and residents would be required before implementing.

The Portfolio Holder extended his thanks to the team for all that had been achieved. He noted the radical transformation in customer interactions. There was a culture of valuing staff. He expressed some nervousness about the use of AI and would want to see lessons learnt elsewhere first. He thanked the committee for their comments.

RESOLVED –

that the committee notes the update in relation to the Customer Experience Strategy.

6 **Report it review**

The committee received a report of the Digital Improvement Manager.

The Associate Director for Customer and Corporate Services introduced the item. 'Report It' was one of the key online processes provided to residents. The online process significantly streamlined back-office processes for a number of on-street reports when it was introduced. As part of the council's Continuous Improvement approach, online forms and processes were regularly reviewed. The report followed the work of a small focus group of councillors looking to improve usability.

The Digital Improvement Manager delivered a presentation to the committee which included:

- An overview of the system and its key features.
- The suggested improvements that had been implemented, those that were in progress and those which could not be taken forward at this stage.

During discussions on the report, members raised the following areas requesting additional information where relevant:

- There was a form to report issues with street name plates outside the Report It system.
- The form to report abandoned vehicles had a lower customer satisfaction score. The limitations of the mapping software meant that geolocations were not always accurate. Officers would look at amending the text of the automated email to better explain how reports of abandoned vehicles were dealt with.
- There was a need for a consistent process around reporting issues with street lighting in parks and officers agreed to resolve this.
- It was noted that refuse vehicles did not collect fly-tipping while on their rounds; the committee would be provided with an explanation about why this was the case.
- There was a suggestion for a short video to demonstrate how to make a report using the system which members could share with constituents and this would be looked at in the communications plan.

The Portfolio Holder commented that much had been achieved through the process which was incredibly complex as it integrated with a variety of back-office systems. It was part of the delivery of excellent customer service.

The committee expressed thanks to the team who had delivered the improvements noting that it was immeasurably better.

RESOLVED –

That the committee notes the update on the improvements to the Report It function.

7 Executive Decision Progress Report

The scrutiny committee was invited to review the current Executive Decision Progress Report for 2023-24 and consider whether any further information was required.

RESOLVED –

that the current 2023/24 Executive Decision Progress report be noted.

8 Hertfordshire County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee

The Chair, as the council's appointed representative on Hertfordshire County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee, noted that the next meeting was scheduled to take place on 19 July.

Members were invited to send topics to Councillor Grimston to raise at the meetings.

9 Work Programme

Members were invited to review Overview and Scrutiny Committee's draft work programme for 2023/24.

Introducing the item, the Chair noted that the work programme provided an outline, but it was for the members to direct the focus of the committee's investigations and establish the outcomes they wished to achieve. The work programme was flexible and issues could be added, removed and rescheduled during the year and into the following municipal year. The Senior Democratic Services Officer highlighted some key areas of the work programme.

RESOLVED –

that the Chair work with officers to incorporate members' suggestions into the 2023/24 work programme.

10

Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting would take place on Wednesday 19 July. A further meeting was scheduled for Thursday 27 July for call-in only.

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.05 pm
and finished at 8.35 pm