

Part A

Report to: *Cabinet*

Date of meeting: *30 October 2023*

Report author: *Intelligence, Performance and Improvement Lead*

Report sponsor: *Associate Director of Customer and Corporate Services*

Portfolio holder: *Cllr Mark Watkin*

Report title: *Continuous Improvement Framework*

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Council Plan 2022-26 sets out an ambition for the organisation to 'pioneer new ways of working that challenge us to innovate, transform and improve'. The concept of 'continuous improvement' has been present across the council for some time, and the proposed approach builds upon this existing good practice by creating a framework.
- 1.2 Whilst there are many good examples of services constantly striving to improve, there has not, to date, been an agreed definition, framework or approach in relation to continuous improvement within Watford. Following engagement with officers from across the organisation, and Portfolio Holders, this paper sets out the work undertaken to develop our continuous improvement framework, the key components of the framework and some example case studies setting out examples of already good practice.
- 1.3 The framework essentially conveys an organisational mindset and is intended to provide a guide to officers and members to support the embedding of continuous improvement across the council and to collectively learn from areas of good practice. It does not introduce a new bureaucratic process or a detailed programme of service reviews and is intended to be applied to everyday examples of improvement (amending content on the website following feedback, streamlining a service process or working more closely with other services) right through to more significant service reviews (such as the Strengthening Housing project, our Voluntary Sector Commissioning Framework or Facilities Management review). In line with the feedback from our people, it focuses on identifying opportunities, utilising insight available to us and celebrating successes. As such, there is a recognition that the empowerment of our people is crucial in embedding a culture of continuous improvement right across the organisation, set within the context of our values and behaviours which encourage trust amongst our people to work together and be bold to provide the very best service for our customers.

1.4 The framework could be applied to strategies across the organisation but have specific links with both the Information and Insight Strategy and Customer Experience Strategy, with the concept of continuous improvement forming a central plank within both.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Cabinet is requested to approve the Continuous Improvement Framework for adoption by the council.

3.0 Report pathway

3.1 Next review body: Not applicable

3.1.1 Indicative date: Not applicable

3.2 Final review body: Not applicable

3.2.1 Indicative date: Not applicable

4.0 Contact Officer:

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Reviewed and signed off by: Liam Hornsby, Associate Director of Customer and Corporate Services

5.0 Detailed proposal

5.1 The mandate for developing a corporate Continuous Improvement Framework was included as part of the council's Delivery Plan 2022-24. Over the last few months, engagement has taken place across the organisation, including two workshop sessions with Service Delivery Leads and the Staff Ambassador Group and one online session. It has also been discussed with the Portfolio Holder and other Cabinet members. The feedback provided from this engagement has been invaluable in developing the Framework and included the following:

- There is a strong culture of looking externally to identify better ways of working at Watford with extensive continuous improvement happening on a regular basis in many services across the council.
- It was acknowledged that some services have improvement activities 'baked in' to the way they work, whereas others find it more challenging, such as regulatory services.

- Language used is important. The definition of continuous improvement, and the process diagram will focus on identifying opportunity.
- Service Delivery Leads were keen to empower officers to identify improvements and suggest/implement fixes where appropriate, with minimal red tape.
- Space and time to reflect provide an opportunity to form potential solutions and should be supported and endorsed by the organisation (and supports our corporate objectives in relation to health and wellbeing).
- The ability for our people to suggest ideas in a simple and easy format should be embraced.

Although, the Office of Local Government (OFLOG) and the new best value guidance were both launched after the work on this framework commenced, the approach will satisfy the requirements of these new regimes.

- Creation of a simple repository attached to the Continuous Improvement Framework which could help support our people when considering improvements to services.

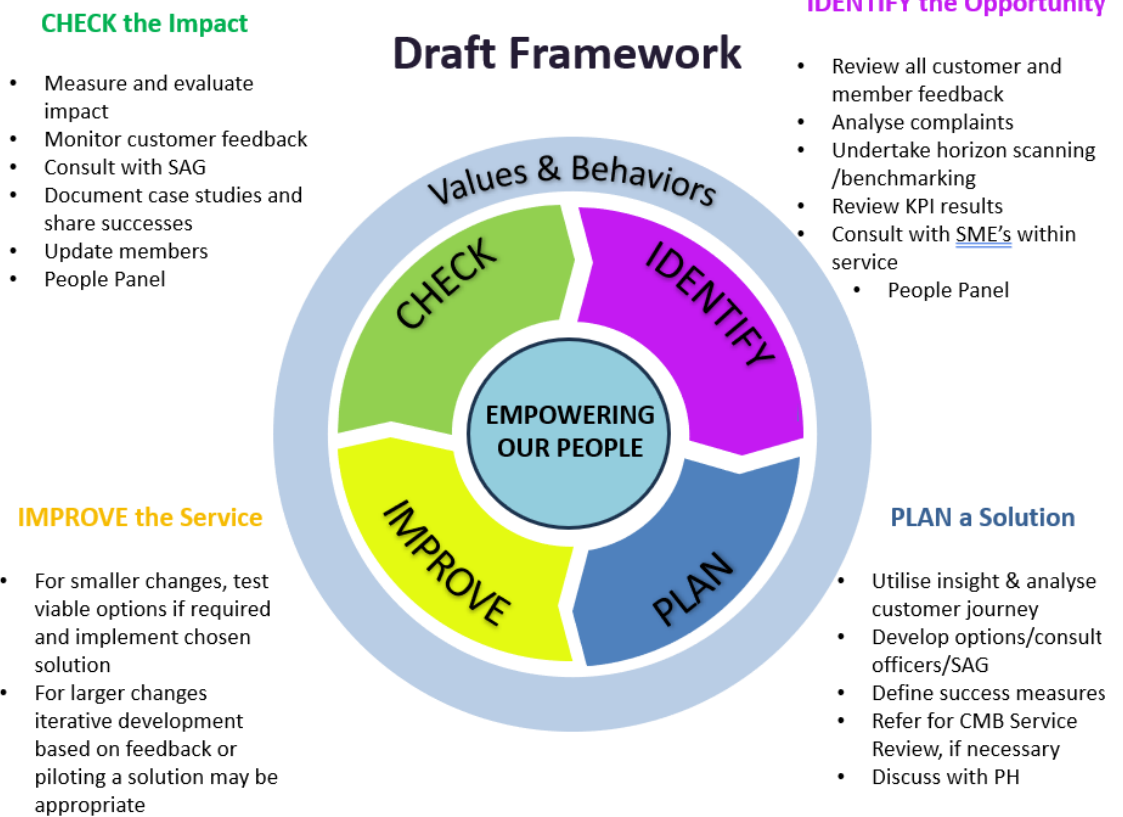
5.2 Feedback also indicated that a clear definition of Continuous Improvement would be beneficial but that this should be 'simple and concise'. As a result, the following definition for Watford is proposed:

Continuous improvement is an ongoing mindset, where improvements are made over time based on evidence, reflection and feedback.

5.3 This definition reflects the fact that continuous improvement is not a finite process but something that can be incremental and part of everyday working or a more significant change across a service area. In all cases, our people are able to use the tools at our disposal (such as data, feedback, benchmarking, endorsed reflection time and horizon scanning) to identify opportunities for services improvements.

5.4 Based on the above, the framework itself sets out four stages of continuous improvement and includes suggestions of aspects our people may consider when seeking to improve services as part of their day to day working. These also reflect the feedback received from the workshops.

5.5 The draft framework is shown below:



5.6 As can be seen from the above, the four proposed stages are as follows:

- **Identify the Opportunity** - Continuous improvement is more focused on proactive activities that identify opportunities to improve, rather than reacting to issues/problems raised. If an issue is raised within a service, it may be a good opportunity to take a more holistic approach and review the whole customer journey end to end, rather than focusing only on fixing the issue raised. Proactive activities for continuous improvement could include:
 - Reviewing feedback from all channels (E.g. - online forms, CSC phone, web, social media, queries raised through Scrutiny Committees or by Portfolio Holders)
 - Analysing KPI results (internal and external) looking for underperformance/negative trends
 - Horizon scanning/Benchmarking/Information sharing with external organisations
 - Taking time to reflect
 - Regular meetings with services, (e.g. CSC monthly meeting with services to discuss customer experience)
 - Collecting staff ideas

- Working with our People Panel
- **Plan a Solution** - The suggested improvement is analysed in detail at this stage, and depending on the size of the change, could include:
 - Analysis of customer journey and data available to gain insight
 - Review of internal tools and solutions that may be utilised, (e.g. technology)
 - Develop possible solutions and define success measures
 - Consult with relevant people (e.g.- Customers, Corporate Management Team, Portfolio Holders, Service Leads, Staff Ambassador Group)
 - This may also be the stage where a more significant improvement plan is needed but this would be based on the identification of an opportunity rather than a set programme of service-by-service reviews (which would contrast with the concept of continual, incremental change and improvements led by our people).
- **Improve the Service** - At this stage the chosen solution is tested and implemented. How this is managed will depend on the size of the change. An update to a web page is likely to be straightforward with minimal testing. Larger changes may need to be extensively designed, piloted or developed in stages or as a part of a project to manage risk and cost.
- **Check the Impact** - The change is reviewed. This could be by:
 - Monitoring customer feedback
 - Consulting with the service/and or staff groups
 - Measuring against performance indicators if relevant
 - Reflecting on the changes
 - Checking back with our People Panel

This is an important stage to check the change has been effective. It is sometimes missed or reduced due to time and resource challenges. This is also an opportunity to document improvements and share successes internally and externally if appropriate. This could support:

- Shared learning/problem solving across the organisation
- Recognise good work undertaken by officers
- Embedding a culture of continuous improvement, inspire others to look for opportunities to improve, and ensure everyone is aware of

the tools and processes available at WBC that support continuous improvement.

5.7 These activities are set within the context of our values and behaviours and with the empowerment of our people at its core. There are examples of good practice from across the organisation but the diagram below provides a low level of example of how the framework could be applied:

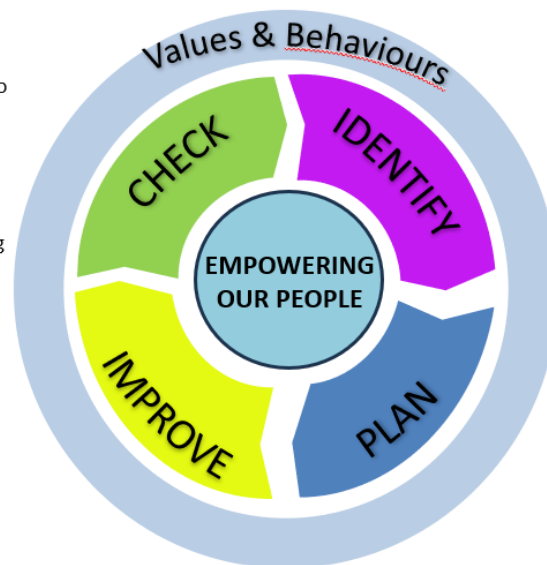
CHECK the Impact

Process closely monitored after go live to ensure bookings were passing through the system correctly. Some changes made based on feedback from the service. Vast majority of inspections now done online, freeing up time for officers who no longer need to take phone calls. Currently working on replicating this process for St Albans, who currently spend approximately 2 hours at the beginning of every day booking building inspections over the phone.

IMPROVE the Service

Form was successfully implemented, creating an online service that allows customers to book an inspection at a time that suits them, without having to phone the Planning Support Team.

Case Study



IDENTIFY the Opportunity

Builders were required to contact the Planning Support Team by phone to check inspector availability and book inspections. The service asked the Digital Improvement Team if there was a way this could be managed online, improving accessibility to the service for customers and saving time for officers.

PLAN a Solution

Digital Improvement Team created an Inspection Booking Form using *Firmstep*, linked to a central inspector calendar, allowing customers (primarily builders) to check inspector availability online and book an inspection.

5.8 There were many other good examples of continuous improvement activities happening across the organisation on a regular basis discussed in the workshops. Another example is summarised in brief below:

- **Identify the Opportunity** – While analysing data received through the online General Enquiry form, it was noted that a lot of the enquiries were related to services that had a dedicated online form in place that customers should be using. Further testing was undertaken to understand why this might be happening, including testing various customer journeys starting from the council website through to online form submission. It appeared that some paths through our website lead to the right online forms, however the customer experience was not always consistent, and customers were sometimes led to our General Enquiry form or the

Complaints, Comments and Compliments form, depending on where they started their journey.

Plan a Solution – Testing results were sent through to the Digital Improvement Team, who are in the process of building a review in to their work plan.

Improve the Service - The solution will aim to ensure that customers are directed to the right online forms where possible, regardless of where their customer journey starts. We will also aim to build in new pathways in the General Enquiry form that direct the customer to the correct online service, should it become clear that they are trying to use the General Enquiry form for a service that has a valid online service available.

Check the Impact – Once the change has been implemented further analysis of the General Enquiry form will be carried out to see if the number of queries related to services with online forms reduces. Customer journeys will also be retested to ensure we are sending customers to the right forms consistently.

5.9 Activities to promote and support continuous improvement are built into the Information and Insight Strategy Delivery Plan and will be implemented over the next two years. These include:

- Development of new Performance App within the council's Business Intelligence platform, to enable better analysis of internal and external KPI results, and highlight areas for improvement
- Expansion of Customer Experience dashboards to include more customer feedback as well as analysis of all customer contact through the website, phones and online forms
- Extending access to Customer Experience dashboards to provide greater visibility
- Officer sharing sessions focused on continuous improvement, and sharing examples of successful case studies from across the council
- Feedback loop established to ensure continuous improvement of the corporate reporting platform

5.10 Subject to the approval of the framework by Cabinet it is proposed that the Customer Experience Lead retains responsibility for the Continuous Improvement Framework and develops a more detailed plan to work with services to embed the framework and capture examples of good practice and successes.

6.0 Implications

6.1 Financial

6.1.1 There are no immediate financial implications as a result of this proposal although it should be noted that an outcome of a continuous improvement culture can be more efficient, and therefore less costly, ways of working helping to deliver value for money.

6.2 Legal issues (Monitoring Officer)

6.2.1 There are no legal implications expected as a result of this proposal.

7.0 Risks

Nature of risk	Consequence	Suggested control measure	Response (treat, tolerate, terminate, transfer)	Risk rating (combination of severity and likelihood)
Council does not have a clear approach to continuous improvement	Opportunities for improvement are missed	Development and approach of Continuous Improvement Framework	Treat	4 x 1 = 4
Staff do not feel empowered to improve services	Opportunities for improvement are missed or not embedded – staff perceived changes as being 'done to' rather than a service-led collaboration	Place the empowerment of staff at the core of the framework	Treat	4 x 1 = 4
Continuous Improvement Framework is not embedded across the organisation	Customers do not see improvements in services and the council is unable to maximise the	Lead assigned responsibility for Continuous Improvement Framework and roll out	Treat	4 x 1 = 4

	efficiency of services			
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8.0 Equalities, Human Rights and Data Protection

8.1 Equalities

8.1.1 Having had regard to the council's obligations under s149, it is considered that an Equalities Impact Assessment is not required for this piece of work.

8.2 Data Protection Impact Assessment

8.2.1 Having had regard to the council's obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018, it is considered that officers are not required to undertake a Data Processing Impact Assessment (DPIA) for this report.

9.0 Next steps should recommendations be approved

9.1 Subject to the approval, the framework will be designed and embedded into the organisation through officer sharing sessions, team meetings and looping back round to both Service Delivery Leads and the Staff Ambassadors Group. Working with these groups, a more detailed plan to roll out the framework and capture examples of good practice and successes will be developed.

10.0 Background Papers

None