

BUSINESS SUPPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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ATTENDANCE OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR COMMUNITY SAFETY AND CUSTOMER CONTACT

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Summary

This report sets out activities and progress on work areas within the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Customer Contact Portfolio, which fall within the remit of this Committee. This information is provided in relation to the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Customer Contact being held to account.

1. Background

1.1 The areas within the terms of reference of this Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered by the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Customer Contact are customer contact, ICT and legal.

2. Achievements for 2013/14

2.1 Community Contact

Introduction

2.1.1 Under the Better for Less Transformation Programme customer contact and administration activity relating to 38 services has so far been reconfigured with the programme delivering a 20% efficiency saving across these areas.

2.1.2 The new Customer Contact model takes full advantage of technology and brings together the best customer service staff from across the Council into one place – the customer contact team. This frees up service specialist time and capacity to focus on front line service

delivery, with Customer Contact additionally having responsibility for all related rules based financial and service eligibility assessments, planning application validation, the Community Interpreting Service and the Welfare Benefits Advice team including the Macmillan service.

Customer Contact Initial Contact

- 2.1.3 Initial Contact is responsible for the council's Contact Centre, which under the BfL Programme is the first point of contact for a significant, and increasing range of services, including: Revenues and Benefits, Social Care, Development Management, Housing Solutions, Environmental, Waste, Highways and Pupil Services (School Admissions, Free School Meals and School Transport), receiving approximately 50,000 calls per month.
- 2.1.4 Customer Contact further offers a new enhanced gateway to council services through its presence in the recently opened Gillingham, Chatham and Rochester Community Hubs, with the investment in the new hubs and the enhanced offer being well received by customers.
- 2.1.5 The service invests considerable time and effort in understanding the customer experience and routinely surveys a sample of customers for views on the service, regularly receiving 90% plus positive satisfaction ratings across a range customer experience measures.
- 2.1.6 The service's management and operational procedures are accredited against the international quality standard ISO 9001 by the British Standards Institute and after a rigorous assessment process the service secured the Customer Service Excellence Award in October 2013. This is a Cabinet Office sponsored scheme recognising excellence in customer service.

Customer Contact Rules Based Assessment

- 2.1.7 Customer Contact has responsibility for a wide range of rules based assessment activity. It determines Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction entitlement, calculates client contribution to Adult Social Care care packages and is responsible for the validation of planning applications:

Revenues and Benefits Financial Assessment

- 2.1.8 This area of work has responded well to the challenges of an increasing workload, generated by the general economic situation, and recruitment challenges, with 86.3% of Housing Benefit claims being determined within 14 days year to date (April 2013 – January 2014).

Social Care Financial Assessment

- 2.1.9 This area of work calculates the contribution Social Care clients make to their care package. It continues to process assessments in a timely fashion, meeting key performance targets set, while additionally being the focus of continuing change. It has recently adopted new financial

assessment processes arising with the implementation of Frameworki, the new social care case management system, and will be an early mobile working adopter, taking full advantage of new hand held devices from April 2014.

Planning Validation

- 2.1.10 This function continues to perform exceptionally well exceeding all performance targets set, and following feedback from major developers it has been decided to co-locate this function with Development Management to further improve communication between the Planning Validation service and Planners, from whom the function takes its professional lead.

Welfare Benefits Service

- 2.1.11 The Welfare Benefits Unit in Customer Contact currently provides advice, information, advocacy and representation on Welfare Benefits issues, with social care and health professionals being able to refer clients directly to the service for assistance with their benefit claims. Self-referrals from clients diagnosed with cancer are also accepted under the current tripartite agreement with Macmillan Cancer Care and NHS Medway.
- 2.1.12 The Macmillan Welfare Benefits advice service is going from strength to strength, with its value being established by customer feedback and through clinical audits undertaken jointly with Macmillan Cancer Care and the Medway Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

Community Interpreting Service

- 2.1.13 The constraints on public finances has led to a downturn in 'Health' commissioning of Community Interpreting Service. This has been partially offset by some new clients being secured and a break even trading position is forecast, after satisfying a circa £290,000 corporate income target.
- 2.1.14 The future viability of the service will be significantly enhanced by its inclusion in a framework being established by NHS Commercial Solution for the provision of interpretation and translation services for NHS organisations in Surrey, Sussex and Kent. The service submitted a bid at the beginning of January in response to the invitation to tender (ITT) issued, and this is currently being evaluated by NHS Commercial Solutions.

Member User (Review) Group

- 2.1.15 This cross-party group, which meets every quarter, continues to provide invaluable support and guidance on the implementation and development of Customer Contact receiving updates on Performance, the Community Hub Programme and customer satisfaction measures.
- 2.1.16 The Member User (Review) Group comprises: Cllrs Peter Hicks, Trevor Clarke, Pat Gulvin, Geoff Juby and Vince Maple.

2.2 Corporate ICT Services

- 2.2.1 ICT support over 3000 users, over 200 sites (including schools, libraries and healthy living centres) and over 150 systems. An out of hours service is also provided for services who wish to buy this additional support, which means an engineer is on call 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, including Christmas Day. In fact the on-call engineer was called twice during Christmas Day, and responded promptly.
- 2.2.2 This service is delivered by 56 permanent members of staff. This includes two apprentices and two new members of staff who have been transferred over from the Adult Education service. There are currently six vacant posts. There are limited development resources within the team, and so any project management or business analyst services required have to be contracted. To ensure these services are procured as efficiently as possible, they are procured from KCC, which is more cost effective than an external agency and brings public sector awareness.
- 2.2.3 The service desk takes an average of 1000 calls a month. In 2013, the percentage of incidents closed by the service desk at the first point of contact was at an average of 50% with some long waiting times on the telephone for customers. This was because there were only 3 service desk technicians. In the latter part of 2013, two apprentices were recruited to the team, and through an intensive training programme, in January 2014 the calls resolved at the first point of contact increased to 61% with a decreased waiting time on the telephone for customers. The service desk hours have also been extended from 8am to 6pm, giving a significantly improved service to customers and also highlighting the value and effectiveness of the apprenticeship scheme.
- 2.2.4 The Kent & Medway regional datacentre, housed at Gun Wharf, provides server hosting services to KCC, the Kent Public Service Network, Kent Fire & Rescue Services and Health. Work is being carried out within the Kent Connects partnership to explore developing the data centre into a service capable of delivering a public sector cloud service to partners, such as a partnership disaster recovery service, shared email etc, to achieve efficiencies where possible.
- 2.2.5 In 2013, a customer satisfaction survey was carried out with an external company, SOCITM. SOCITM represents the IT service primarily across the public sector, and so the benchmarking family was comprised of other comparable local authorities. There were three unitary authorities in the benchmarking programme, and of the three unitaries, Medway Council gained the highest satisfaction level. There was a 17% response rate from staff and managers, which was considered a reasonable response rate, with 32% feeling the service had improved, 21% that it had worsened, and 47% identifying no change. Key areas of concern for staff were the fitness for purpose of the ICT hardware, the service desk manpower and the inability to work flexibly. With the programmes we have introduced recently,

these issues should be directly addressed. There were a number of constructive comments, but the overriding issue was concerns over the lack of financial investment in ICT, with 80% of staff identifying that ICT was essential to enable them to deliver services. Improvements suggested, where viable, will be included in the ICT Service Improvement Plan for 2014-2015.

- 2.2.6 There are a number of security requirements we have to achieve – Public Services Network (PSN) compliance, which is compliance to use the Government’s secure network – which we successfully achieved without significant investment or without compromising existing programmes of work such as Agile Working; PCIDSS compliance, which is the credit card industry compliance requirements, achieved in conjunction with colleagues in finance; and Information Governance compliance which enables connection to the N3 (health) network. All of these are important to ensure the data the Council has responsibility for remains secure.
- 2.2.7 The key priority for the team has been to support the Better for Less Transformation programme. This involves the three members of the development team, a small testing team and a project manager from ICT. The team successfully worked to deliver the requirements of the programme, although it was not without its impact on other work required from other services within the council.
- 2.2.8 As part of Better for Less the three new community hubs had to be significantly enhanced to provide the ICT equipment for customer contact to be able to serve its customers efficiently and effectively. The ICT technical support team worked long hours into the night to ensure that the hubs were ready and working as required by Customer Contact. There is still some minor snagging work taking place, but this is more to do with the fixtures as opposed to the IT.
- 2.2.9 Two other major transformation programmes are also taking place – Agile Working and Thin Client. Both of these require significant involvement of ICT – the latter is 100% technical.
- 2.2.10 Agile Working is looking at individual services and identifying how, through changing process, they could work more efficiently, and in some cases, to achieve this they may need alternative technology to enable them to work more flexibly from locations other than their permanent office base, and so there are very close links with the property strategy. A programme manager, business analyst and technical architect working with services to identify better ways of working, but it is the responsibility of the service to develop the business case for ‘invest to save’ opportunities.
- 2.2.11 Thin Client is centralising the ICT hardware equipment, and installing where possible, thin client technology, which is more efficient to run as it uses far less power than a PC, is cheaper to buy, lasts longer and can be supported more efficiently. As well as centralising the investment in desktop hardware, the budget for major business critical systems is also being centralised into ICT to ensure that this

funding is used more effectively across the software estate, and can support rationalisation of systems where appropriate to do so.

- 2.2.12 As well as these major programmes of work, ICT also has a number of smaller projects it is supporting – schools building work which requires ICT input, new systems such as parking, social care (adults) and building control, upgrades to major systems such as housing and highways – and general requirements from all areas of the Council.

2.3 Legal

Strategic advice

- 2.3.1 We advised on the legalities of a controversial transfer of a surplus on the Council's HRA to its general fund, and obtained an opinion from Andrew Arden QC, a leading authority on local government and housing finance. The money transferred will be used in the expansion of the Community Hub projects at Strood and Twydall, and the refurbishment/relocation of Riverside 1.

Land Charges

- 2.3.2 Local and charges are still providing an excellent turnaround time of 1-2 working days.
- 2.3.3 Local Land Charges at Medway Council have been short listed for the 2014 Local Land Charges Awards for Excellence for "Best performing level 3 Land Charges Department". The winners will be announced at the Local Land Charges Awards Gala Dinner on 24 February 2014 at the Bristol Hotel.

Adults, Property and Contracts Team

Property

- 2.3.4 To date, in this financial year the team has completed:
- the disposal of the site of the former Jezreel's Tower site (a difficult site to sell)
 - two 25 year contracts for the provision of care for the elderly
 - the conversion of 7 schools to academies
 - 9 right to buy council house sales
 - documentation required to enable the c£4m redevelopment of Rochester Airport
 - the acquisition of additional adult education premises at 48 Canterbury Street
 - the acquisition of 133 High Street (the new Strood Community Hub) and the lease for a storage property for the Strood Community Project, to enable them to move out of their High Street shop. This was drafted, negotiated and completed within 3 days of instructions being received.

- 16 reports on title to help our Housing Department decide whether land will be suitable for the development of new social housing.
- Production of a legal pack for the development of Stanley Wharf at Rochester Riverside to help developers make fully-costed bids for this flagship site
- A statutory service charge consultation with nearly 200 long leaseholders of Council flats with regard to the Long Term Stock Maintenance Contract, which the Council are currently in the process of re-tendering.

2.3.5 We also anticipate/hope that the following will be completed before 31/03/2014:

- the sale of the former Park & Ride site
- documentation to enable the relocation of Rochester Station (including provisions to enhance Rochester Riverside)
- documentation to procure the bringing The Black House (a listed building) back into use at no cost to the Council
- 4 more academy conversions

Contracts

2.3.6 A number of contracts that have been completed, including contracts for improvements to Rochester Castle Tower Two, improvements works to Medway maintained schools, Youth Connections contracts and ICT solutions.

Planning

2.3.7 **Chatham Waters:** A public inquiry was scheduled for 28 January 2014 for the Secretary of State to determine an appeal by Peel Holdings Limited against the Council's refusal against the first Reserved Matters application for Chatham Waters. The main issue was the effect of the proposed Reserved Matters on the character and appearance of the area with particular regard to the height, siting and design of the proposed pub/restaurant and food/beverage unit, and the extent of their integration with later phases, in the context of the Pier Road frontage and the overall scale and layout of the development. The appeal was dismissed.

2.3.8 **Core Strategy:** Following the findings of the Planning Inspector, the Council withdrew the Core Strategy in November 2013. This leaves the Council without an up-to-date development plan to determine planning applications against, leaving it open to speculative applications and the likelihood of increased planning appeals and costs awards against it. This is a significant risk to the Council. The test as to whether the local plan is up to date is its compliance with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The Senior Lawyer has supported Council's planning policy team in assessing the local plan policies against the NPPF, so that the Council can continue to put full weight on the Local Plan. Appeal decisions will be monitored so that advice can be updated where appropriate.

- 2.3.9 **Lodge Hill:** Following the notification of Lodge Hill as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), the outline planning application for Lodge Hill is yet to be determined and, depending on negotiations with the developer, is likely to be 'called in' by the Secretary of State, leading to a public inquiry. Determination of the application has significant risks for the Council given the site's status as a SSSI and the various material considerations which need to be balanced including ecological impacts, prematurity, and alternatives all requiring the support of expert commercial, ecological and further legal expertise. The team will continue to provide support to Planning Committee and the Council's Planning team.

Litigation

- 2.3.10 Urgent action was taken by Legal Services on 14 February against an aggressive and threatening parent at a Council primary school, who had already been banned from the school premises on 16 January. The parent was cautioned by the police for an assault on a member of the school staff and then made further threats to school staff. The team obtained witness statements in record time and got the case into the court the same day. An injunction was obtained against the parent.

Children's Services

- 2.3.11 Following the case of *A and S (Children) v Lancashire County Council [2012]* the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, Tim Loughton MP, wrote to all local authorities to advise that they review the cases of all children whose legal status is "freed for adoption" who had not been adopted, to ensure that they do not remain subject to unnecessary freeing orders. Such children are referred to as "statutory orphans", as no-one other than the local authority as the adoption agency has parental responsibility for them. Freeing orders were replaced in December 2005 with placement orders under the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which do not remove the child's legal ties to their families.
- 2.3.12 We were allocated a case regarding two siblings who had been subject to Freeing Orders since 2006. Sadly, no suitable adoptive family could be found for the children. Their plan was therefore changed to one of long-term foster care and they had settled in well to their placements. As freeing orders are no longer part of the current legal framework and had not been dealt with by the team before, one of the team undertook extensive research in order to ascertain the law in respect of revoking such an order, and the process that should be followed. She discovered that an application should be made to the High Court to exercise its inherent jurisdiction to revoke the freeing order, and advised and assisted the Children's Social Worker throughout the initial process. The application has now been lodged with the High Court and we are awaiting a hearing date. Two more cases regarding revocation of freeing orders have now been received, and we are delighted to have the opportunity to

use our newly acquired experience in this area to assist the client department in dealing with these cases efficiently and to ensure the best outcome for the children involved.

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Background documents

None