

BUSINESS SUPPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4 DECEMBER 2014

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 since last report (March 2014)

2.1 Community Contact

2.1.1 Customer Contact was established under the Better for Less Transformation Programme as part of the strategy to protect frontline service delivery whilst delivering savings through more effective ways of working.

2.1.2 Taking full advantage of technology, Customer Contact places contact management under dedicated leadership, professionalising customer service and allowing service specialists to focus on front line service delivery. Customer Contact additionally has responsibility for a range of other related activities such as:

- Revenues and Benefits assessment and processing, helping some of Medway's neediest residents and helping to secure the financial health of the Council through effective council tax administration
- Adult Social Care financial assessment, determining contributions to the cost of social care
- Planning validation; ensuring applications are sufficiently complete to allow the planning process to proceed smoothly
- Community Interpreting Service, a trading service providing interpretation and translation services in over 60 languages
- Welfare Benefits Advice, including the successful partnership with Macmillan Cancer Care, helping people with or affected by cancer to reduce their financial concerns and worries.

2.2 Customer Contact Initial Contact

- 2.1.1 Initial Contact is the first point of contact for advice and information for a significant and increasing range of Council 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). This team currently receives over 41,000 each month.
- 2.1.2 Through its presence in the Council's new Community Hubs, Customer Contact has established an enhanced gateway to Council services, which consistently receives positive customer feedback. This successful model will shortly be rolled out in the new Strood Community Hub, which is scheduled to open on time and on budget in early 2015.
- 2.1.3 Customer Contact also has responsibility for Riverside 1, providing face to face housing benefit and housing solutions help and advice. However, Riverside 1 requires significant and costly structural repairs in the not too distant future and with this building also not sitting comfortably within ambitious regeneration plans for this part of Chatham, connecting and building upon this locality's significant heritage, negotiations have been opened on the relocation of Riverside 1 services. This offers an exciting service development opportunity to create a more comfortable, contemporary service environment, incorporating such features as supported self service.
- 2.1.4 The service continues to invest considerable time and effort in understanding the customer experience and it routinely surveys a sample of customers for views on the service, continuing to receive 90% plus positive satisfaction ratings across a range of customer experience measures.
- 2.1.5 The service is further open to and values independent external scrutiny. Its management and operational procedures are accredited against the international quality standard ISO by the British Standards Institute and it holds the Customer Service Excellence Award, the

Cabinet Office sponsored scheme recognising excellence in customer service.

2.3 Customer Contact Financial and Service Eligibility Assessment

Revenues and Benefits Financial Assessment

- 2.3.1 Over 80% of new Housing Benefit claims are currently being determined within 14 days but in a desire to learn from best practice, the DWP Performance Development Team were recently invited to provide feedback on current assessment and operating practices. This proved a useful exercise with a new action plan now being framed to deliver further service improvement, with a focus being placed on managing customer demand better.
- 2.3.2 A working group has been established to oversee the implications of the roll out of Universal Credit for this area of work, and is currently considering the most recent announcement by the Secretary of State that Universal Credit will be rolled out from February 2015 to all remaining Jobcentres and Local Authorities for new single claimants previously eligible for Jobseekers Allowance, including those with existing Housing Benefit and Tax Credit claims.

Social Care Financial Assessment

- 2.3.3 This area of work has recently struggled to achieve performance targets as a result of difficulties in recruiting to vacant posts, the unfortunate long term sickness absence of the team manager, the need to embed new processes arising from the implementation of Frameworki, the new social care management system, and the diversion of resources to the development and testing of the team's new mobile application. However, a recent recruitment exercise has been successful, the team manager returned to work at the beginning of October, new processes have been successfully embedded and the new mobile application is on course to be adopted in early 2015.

Planning Validation

- 2.4.4 This function continues to perform exceptionally well, exceeding all performance targets set.

Welfare Benefits Service

- 2.4.5 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 in maximising benefit entitlement.
- 2.4.6 Self-referrals from clients diagnosed with or affected by cancer are also accepted under a tripartite agreement with Macmillan Cancer Care and Medway Clinical Commissioning Group. Macmillan Cancer Care has agreed to continue its support through to 2016, although a new funding proposition needs to be framed to continue this valuable service after that time.

Community Interpreting Service

- 2.4.7 The retirement of the Community Interpreting Service Manager has allowed an experienced colleague with a passion for the service to step up and manage this remit, and despite a more challenging trading environment the number of confirmed appointments is currently comparable to last year.

Member User (Review) Group

- 2.4.8 This cross-party group, which meets every quarter, continues to provide invaluable support and guidance on the implementation and development of Customer Contact and the last meeting received a briefing on the Community Hub Programme, considered in detail the latest Customer Contact customer satisfaction measures, considered plans to achieve greater customer self service and reviewed options for the relocation of Riverside 1.

3. Corporate ICT Services

- 3.1 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 provides access to an engineer 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, including Christmas Day. In fact the on-call engineer was called twice during his Christmas lunch on Christmas Day, and responded promptly and efficiently.
- 3.2 In the third quarter of 2013, a customer satisfaction survey was carried out by SOCITM. SOCITM represents the IT community across the public sector, and so the benchmarking family was comprised of other comparable local authorities. The local authorities are identified as Shire, County, Unitary and metropolitan, but their names remain anonymous. There were two other unitary authorities in the benchmarking programme, and of the three unitaries, Medway Council gained the highest satisfaction level. 32% of respondents felt that the service had improved, 21% that it had worsened, and 47% identifying no change, which again is positive news for the service. There were very positive comments in that those surveyed felt that ICT had good technical skills and resolved problems efficiently and effectively, but two areas of concern were the fitness for purpose of the ICT hardware, the speed of response by the ICT service desk. With the programmes we have introduced recently, being Agile Working, Thin Client and an improved service desk, all well advanced, these issues are being directly addressed. A significant comment was that 80% of staff, the highest figure in the benchmarking, identified that ICT was integral to enable them to deliver their services.
- 3.3 The ICT service desk takes an average of 1000 calls a month. The service desk hours have been extended from 8am to 6pm, giving a significantly improved service to customers and also highlighting the value and effectiveness of the apprenticeship scheme.

- 3.4 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 private cloud service to partners, such as a partnership disaster recovery service, shared email and shared services to achieve efficiencies where possible.
- 3.5 There are a number of security requirements we have had to achieve over the past year: 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, and compliance which some councils across the country are still struggling to achieve; 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.
- 3.6 The key priority for the team has been to support the Better for Less Transformation programme. 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 the Customer Contact service. Work is now taking place to ensure that the Strood Community Hub opens on schedule.
- 3.7 The Agile Working programme is working with all services across the Council, and identifying how, through changing their processes, they could work more efficiently, and the technology they need in order to achieve this. This programme is using business analysts recruited to identify a workstyle for each job role, which may be a fixed location worker or a mobile worker. Technology is being allocated according to the workstyle of the job role, not according to preferences. As this also requires changes in working practices, HR services are also very closely involved, ensuring that services are supported, as there is a significant culture change required when working practices change.
- 3.8 The Thin Client project is very closely aligned with Agile Working. Thin Client technology 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. This project is well under way now with over 50% of thin clients deployed and energy savings already identified, and is on target for completion at the end of this financial year.
- 3.9 There are a significant number of change projects taking place. The ICT team are involved in over 300 'Requests for Change' which range from implementing a complete new system and major system upgrades, supporting the property moves for children's services and other services scheduled to move premises, Better for Less Phase 4, to reports and minor upgrades. The Corporate ICT Systems Board,

comprised of key service leads, meets on a monthly basis and reviews the change requests, prioritising within their directorates when necessary to do so. Corporate prioritisation of work takes place at Corporate Management Team as and when required.

4. **Legal**

4.1 **Legal Services**

4.1.1 The Legal Services restructure was implemented in August 2014. There are now two teams, People and Place (reduced from five).

The new structure which involves a broadening of roles with all solicitors advising on some issues such as Council decision making and information law, whilst maintaining their specialisms will mean we can:

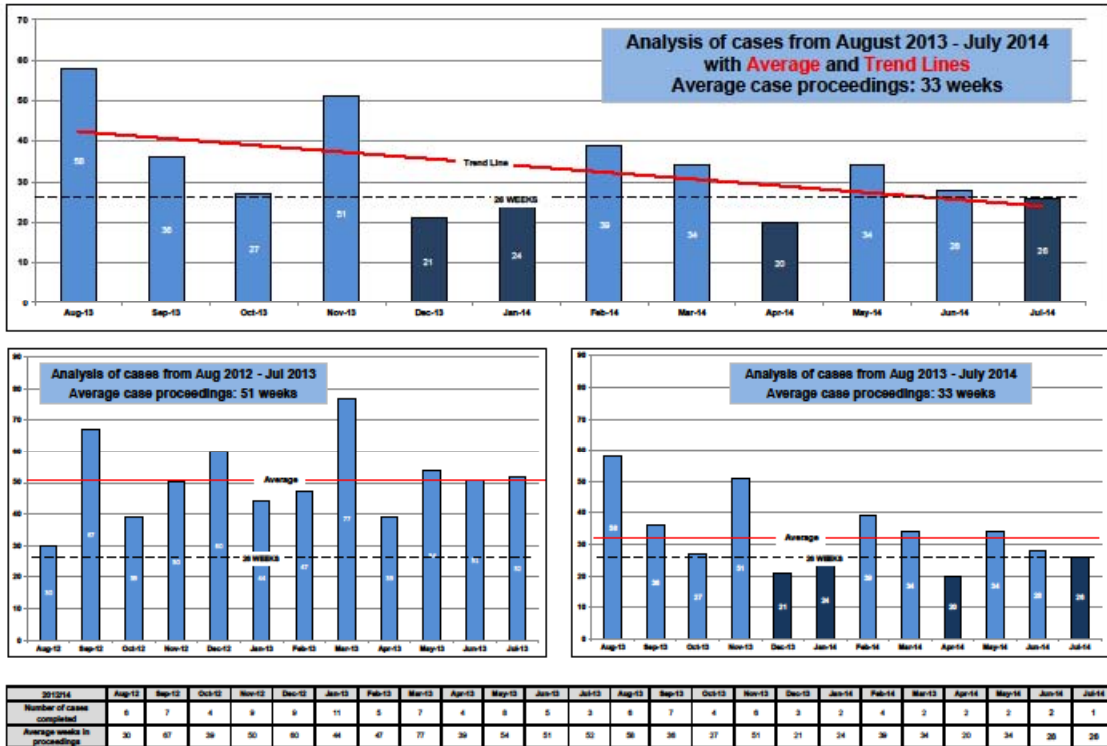
- provide a better and more responsive service to our clients at substantially less cost than is currently the case (the savings will be £100,000 per annum from the next financial year)
- free up capacity so that we can undertake legal work for other public bodies and generate external income for the Council
- further enhance our reputation as a centre of excellence in public law advice
- enrich everyone in the team's job and make this a more rewarding place to work.

4.2 **People Team**

4.2.1 Continued progress has been made to reduce the overall time to process Care proceedings. In July 2013 on average cases would take 54 weeks. By July 2014 we had reduced that to just 33 weeks putting us on course to meet the target of 26. In fact we are now averaging 30 weeks. The diagram below demonstrates that in four of the recent months cases were dispatched in less than 26 weeks. This has been a joint effort between the Social Care teams who prepare the evidence and make professional judgements about the case and the lawyers who advise on the legal aspects and who carry out the advocacy at court.

Medway Council

Average number of weeks in proceedings for child care cases for the last 2 years



4.2.2 The People Legal team have also been grappling with a case involving a Russian national father who has sought to involve the local media and the European Parliament in his case. This comes at a time when the domestic courts are considering the impact of allowing greater transparency of care cases. With the interest of the child paramount in English law, the legal team have had to consider how to respond to the use of social media by the father who posted his petition to the European Parliament on YouTube and a reporting restriction order made by a judge to Twitter.

4.2.3 Also the team have needed to advise on a sensitive education matter that has attracted national and local media coverage involving the disciplining of children at a previous LEA school that is now an Academy. There were various legal aspects including the role of Trustees in an Academy and the disclosure of information.

4.3 **Place Team**

4.3.1 *Property:* In addition to the everyday work including providing advice and drafting of agreements in relation to land disposals, wayleaves, easements, development agreements, purchases, leases, licences, deeds of variation, lease renewals, restrictive covenants, deeds of dedication for highways, title issues and queries the team has provided tailored project support and legal advice including:

- Rochester Riverside - including deducing title to the Council's land and preparing a seller's pack on behalf of the Council, assisting the client departments with the sale of land in tranches, including providing advice on traffic management issues
- Rochester Station - supporting the progress of this large and important development in particular in relation to the preparation of leases and easements to enable the works to be carried out
- Service contracts for care provision at two facilities
- Planning and development – we advised on the planning application for a new mosque at Croneens Car Park
- Eight Right to Buy transactions have been completed since January 2014 and a further eight are currently being progressed
- A number of Academy conversions have been completed including commercial transfer agreements and long leases

The team is heavily involved in supporting the regeneration of the Medway area.

4.3.2 *Contracts:* In addition to providing advice in relation to Gateway reports for Procurement Board and contracts generally and drafting agreements the team has advised on:

- Sun Pier Pontoon – a successful adjudication in relation to a fixed price building contract.
- A very large and complex contract relating to the outsourcing of care services at a care facility. This was successfully handled and completed by the in-house team.

4.3.3 *Planning:* The team provides advice and support in relation to planning enforcement, including the drafting of notices, lawful development certificates and on draft reports and at committee.

- Special Planning Committee - the decision to approve the outline planning application in relation to Lodge Hill was taken on 4 September 2014. The decision was referred to the Secretary of State from whom a decision is awaited as to whether it will be called in for determination.
- Public Inquiry - Commissioners Road - The applicant's appealed against the decision of the Council as Local Planning Authority to refuse the application The inquiry is due to start on 2 December 2014 for 4 days and Counsel has been instructed to represent the Council.

4.3.4 *Litigation:* In addition to the team providing advice in relation to employment issues, contract disputes, debt collection, licensing and ad hoc advice the team have also successfully undertaken prosecutions on behalf of the Council in relation to, by way of example littering, fly

tipping, planning enforcement and benefit fraud on a daily basis the team has dealt specifically with the following:

- The team successfully defended a challenge under the Public Contracts Regulations 2006 by providing a robust response to a claim by an aggrieved contractor following the council's decision to award a contract to a transport operator.
- A special project relating to enforcement and prosecution action against rogue private sector landlords has begun and a substantial fine has already been imposed on one landlord.
- The team has also successfully obtained restraining orders against two members of the public who have harassed council and school based staff.

4.4 **Local Land Charges**

4.4.1 Local Land Charges continue to provide an excellent service within the top quartile nationally for the processing time of official searches and we also respond well within time to requests for information under the Environmental Information Regulations.

4.4.2 The Local Land Charges team continue to work closely with the Local Land Charges Institute, the Local Government Association and Land Data about the Land Registry proposal to widen their range of information services to include searches of the Local Land Charges Register and other information currently supplied by local authorities. This forms part of the Infrastructure Bill and is progressing through the House of Lords, before moving onto the House of Commons. Further consultation will take place in the new financial year on the proposed changes to the secondary legislation (Local Land Charges Act 1975 and Rules of 1977) to remove this as a Local Authority function and place it with the Land Registry.

4.4.3 Local Land Charges also cover Commons and Village Greens and this has seen new changes in legislation that will come into effect on 15 December 2014.

4.5 **Licensing**

4.5.1 The Licensing team have been dealing with the regular changes to the Licensing legislation and mandatory conditions. Licensing is also progressing with data cleansing for public access to our information.

4.5.2 Licensing Services are dealing with an increase in applications including the 3-yearly taxi driver renewals. Licensing Enforcement is working in partnership with the police, other local authorities and sections within Medway on all aspects of compliance and enforcement with operations taking place some of which conclude at midnight and others run till 0200.

4.5.3 The Licensing team are also working with the local taxi trade to find measures to provide adequate protection to customers where out of

Medway hackney carriage drivers licensed by other authorities are operating as private hire in our area.

4.6 **Gambling**

- 4.6.1 Over the last 18 months meetings have taken place with the Gambling Commission and with the Association of British Bookmakers (ABB) and gambling and gaming operators in Medway. These meetings have resulted in the signing of a voluntary partnership agreement between the gambling operators and the licensing authority.
- 4.6.2 As part of this voluntary agreement gambling operators will pilot a new self-exclusion scheme. It is anticipated that the self-exclusion pilot will start in early December in Chatham and will run for two year.
- 4.6.3 The combination of the Voluntary Partnership Agreement and the pilot self-exclusion scheme extending to more than one operator is the first of its kind in the country and was featured on BBC South East and reported extensively in the Local Government Chronicle on 20 November during the pre-election period.

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Background documents

None