

MINUTES OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY TASK GROUP - SINGLE FRONT OFFICE

MEETING DATE Monday, 10 August 2015

MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Alistair Morwood (Chair), Councillor (Vice-Chair) and Councillors John Dalton, Mark Jarnell, Matthew Lynch, June Molyneaux, Mick Muncaster and Debra Platt

OFFICERS: Lesley-Ann Fenton (Director of Customer and Advice Services), Asim Khan (Head of Customer, ICT and Transactional Services), Helen Sutton (Customer Services Manager (Direct Services)), Alison Wilding (Customer Services Manager (Digital and Ancillary Services)) and Dianne Scambler (Democratic and Member Services Officer)

APOLOGIES: None

OTHER MEMBERS: None

15.NW1 Declarations of Any Interests

No declarations of interests were declared.

15.NW2 Single Front Office - background information

The Head of Customer and ICT Services presented Members with a high level overview of how the Single Front Office had evolved since its inception in 2001/02. It was around this time that there was a general trend across public services to mirror the workings of private industries in relation to how it communicated with its residents. The development of the new customer services model consolidated all reception areas across the Council along with the different methods that the public used to access its services to provide a holistic approach and overview with one central access point.

The Council were able to use all its intelligence data across all of its services to tailor its services more effectively for the customer and give a more enhance experience at first contact. The biggest physical change to this new way of working was face to face contact with the customer. In order to facilitate the whole of the Council's services being able to be accessed at one point in a newly created Contact Centre, the ground floor of the Civic Offices at Union Street was remodelled and supported by a Customer Relationship Management System (CRM) that provided the IT infrastructure behind the front facing service.

In 2003, the Council, along with several other district Councils, entered into a contract with Lancashire County Council for the development of a Lancashire Shared Contact Centre. However, progress of the implementation of the CRM infrastructure by the County Council was considered to too slow for this authority so Chorley opted out of the partnership and deployed Microsoft Dynamics.

Chorley's original Contact Centre offered a small basket of services initially that was added to year by year and now has a great wealth of services that can be accessed at one point of call. The Council has achieved significant savings through the changes that have been made, and improved and sustained good performance in service delivery. ICT and Customer Services were combined in 2010, with its key driver being to promote greater digital engagement with citizens that is still paramount today.

As the Council needs to ensure that it is able to respond to continued changes and challenges in delivering high quality services against a backdrop of drastically reduced resources and increased demand, the creation of a single front office has become crucial. The proposals will build on the approach already being undertaken by the authority, but would lead to significant changes in staffing arrangements and service delivery.

It was initially envisaged that, the front office will in the main be a single, generic team of officers who manage customer contact and service requests coming into the Council from any of the primary access channels, in person, online or phone. In addition to customer and transactional processes, it will include ancillary services that support delivery of the front office. In the longer term the majority of contact will be via digital channels as more customers are migrated to online and other formats.

The migration of processes to the front office would enable an immediate reduction in management costs, and in the longer term will enable further reductions in the back office. Significant savings of £175,000 have already been achieved through these immediate changes.

It is anticipated that full implementation of the single front office will take up to two years, fully integrating the front office into a single team, securing further savings through process improvements, reducing duplication with the back office and improving productivity and other external changes.

The drivers for the implementation of the Single Front Office are to ensure that the Council has a business model that is sustainable in the long term and is able to fully exploit opportunities such as shared services with other councils, manage demand effectively by making best use of its intelligence and where possible intervening early to reduce customer demand and manage peaks and troughs, smoothing processes to improve productivity to provide opportunities for efficiencies and income generation. The delivery of the Single Front Office is also timely because of wider changes that are taking place currently that impact on the revenue and benefits service as a result of the governments welfare reform programme.

Over the years there has been a significant increase of digital take up by residents to access services and make payments and the service is striving to build on this by ensuring that people have access to the right technologies and have the confidence to access services online. This has been heavily resourced to ensure future success.

The Council is undertaking a review of the policies and processes associated with the service to ensure that they are fit for purpose going forwards and a number of these are currently out for consultation in the public domain. The authority has also invested heavily in the training, development and knowledge of staff to establish greater flexibility across the teams whilst improving upon performance and productivity.

The Head of Customer and ICT Services manages a team consisting of two Customer Services Managers, five Customer Services Team Leaders, and 36.29 FTE Customer Services Officers, and 10.3FTE Support and other specified officers. The Single Front Office now deals with 15 service areas that include, Council Tax, Housing Benefits, Business Rates, Website editing, Sundry Debtors and Parking. Licensing, Land Charges, Get Up and Go, Planning Support, Travel Passes and Select Move. Electoral Registration, Bereavement Services, together with Waste, Grounds and Streetscene.

Helen Sutton, Customer Services Manager (Direct Services) explained the training programme that is currently being undertaken by staff to support the implementation of the Single Front Office.

A two year comprehensive training plan was developed as the scale of change demanded a phased approach. Priority areas were identified based on demand and work load that included Housing Benefits and Council Tax enquiries. Other areas were also identified where there was insufficient cover. The training provided was a combination of external providers, for the legislatively complex areas, complemented by internal shadowing and mentoring.

In order to facilitate the comprehensive training programme, staff needed to be completely removed from their positions; this led to an increase in the volumes of work outstanding and placed added pressure on those staff covering. In response, the Council employed Capacity Grid initially to help alleviate workloads by outsourcing some housing benefit processing; staff were also offered the opportunity to work extra hours.

Staff were fully supported by the Council through these changes by the provision of 1-2-1 mentoring, access to experienced staff at all times and a recognition that some staff are better suited to direct customer contact than others. There have been huge benefits as the programme has seen the self-development of staff across the service. Most staff are now skilled in an additional service area or at an enhanced level of processing. More tasks are completed end to end on the frontline, particularly in benefits and council tax, removing the need to handover to other staff and providing a quicker and more efficient service for both customer and Council. There is now also much more resilience in the service to target peaks in service demand.

Learning has shaped the second phase of training; smaller groups will be targeted and phased over a longer period that will benefit staff and service delivery. A review of the training programme has recently been undertaken that will result in some changes going forward. A report is due to be taken to Executive Cabinet shortly that outlines a change of approach to training as a result of the learning so far and will move away from completely generic workforce to extending the capacity in some key specialist areas. Staff will have a generic skill set and retain a specialist area plus one that will be closely aligned such as housing benefit and council tax. Expressions of interest have recently been asked for so that all staff are given the same opportunity.

The programme has seen lots of progress in its first year in addition to the development of staff. There are now seven staff that are capable of dealing with housing benefit and council tax applications face to face that can make a decision on the day. Staff are encouraging customers who ring to make payments to use the ATP line texting and email options and there has been a huge increase in online applications with virtually 100% of housing benefit applications being completed online. This ensures quicker processing times generally.

The service now undertakes, e-billing and e-notifications for landlords and all visiting officers have been issued with iPads. Work is also being currently undertaken to review the sundry debtor process by identifying those services that can be paid for up front.

Alison Wilding, Customer Services Manager (Digital and Ancillary Services) reported on the performance and productivity figures for the service giving a high level overview of performance in the first quarter compared to 2013 and 2014. Some of the performance measures are tailored around customer satisfaction.

The percentage of abandoned call rate of 10% had reduced slightly compared to 2014; however, it was still an increase against the 8.9% in 2013.

The number of complaints received are consistently low, although recent changes to the council tax local discounts scheme have contributed to an increase in quarter one of 2015.

Performance in some areas influences the Council's income stream, such as Collection rates and the Council has made a big effort to increase their target on empty property inspections as this determines the amount of revenue paid to the authority by the Government under the new homes bonus grant for increasing the number of homes in use.

In other areas, the last quarter 26% of changes in Revenue and Benefits were made at the first point of contact and performance in licensing activities remained at a consistent level.

Sundry debtor performance is more challenging and the team are working with other services as they need to take some responsibility for the invoices they produce.

Individual staff targets are set and monitored through one to ones and regular performance and productivity meetings with the Head of Service are held where team and individual performances are discussed. It is the manager's daily responsibility for closely managing the team's workloads and addressing any potential issues, such as an increase in work tray volumes. The team now has the ability to move resources to meet customer demand/peak in the work flow.

The service also undertakes weekly Business Improvement meetings to discuss and progress any issue, all managed through MyProjects. The overall vision is that all processes/systems are efficient and centred around paperless and less clicks for users of our systems.

A number of reviews have been or are currently being undertaken that include, Council Tax recovery, Business Rates and Empty Homes, Cemeteries and Planning Services.

The Council continues to face challenges ahead with a projected further 2m shortfall in finances expected against a backdrop of growing expectations by residents, to access services faster and better. People have a higher expectation of service delivery by the Council as opposed to other service providers in the private market. Digital services will continue to be the main focus in driving down cost and meeting these expectations and the authority are committed to providing additional support to those residents who struggle with this way of accessing service for a variety of differing reasons. Both customers and staff are being encouraged to take responsibility and ownership of their own lives, by investing in training and support to break digital access barriers.

The resilience of the service will be of paramount importance as the authority needs to demonstrate flexibility and manage services against high demand and a growing population by training and mentoring staff to ensure that they have the right skills to cover as and when required. The Council also needs to keep one eye on the wider public reform so that it is able to react and meet the expectations of projects and changes imposed by Central Government.

15.NW3 Scoping of the Review

It was considered that Members would benefit from shadowing customer service staff in the contact centre and the Head of Customer and Advice extended an invitation for the whole Group to attend a session for a demonstration of the software used to support front office and it was agreed that this would all need to take place before the next meeting. Members will undertake their shadowing opportunity in pairs and report back to the next meeting.

The Group discussed what additional information they would like to consider that would help to give them a better understanding of how technology will change the face of the Council over the next few years. It was considered that a meeting to look at what services were currently available online, would be advantageous to understand what services could now be completed online.

Members felt that they needed to ascertain if customer feedback was positive and asked for more detailed information in relation to the abandoned call rate to try to establish if there were any patterns being formed.

There have been improvements recently implemented for dealing with those issues from residents that are the responsibility of Lancashire County Council. Customers are now informed of how these issues/complaints have been progressed, in terms of the partner responsible and initial likely response times. This has been made easier with the introduction of the staff reporting system being made publicly available online and promotes the transparency of the Council.

The Group asked if the Council was using My Account to its full advantage and raised issues that Members faced in relation to using the system that included the reporting of multiple issues on behalf of their constituents and asked if the holding responses could be more specific and personal to the issues in hand. There was also a request to explore the possible expansion of the system to include a section for Members to store their case work so that information they wished to retain about issues could be done so in a secure way.

AGREED:

1. That Members undertake shadowing of staff in the Contact Centre and report back to the next meeting.
2. That the Group attend a demonstration of the IT software that supports the front office.
3. That a demonstration of the Council's website be undertaken to understand what services and information can be accessed online by residents and visitors to Chorley.
4. That further detailed performance information be provided including abandoned call rates and times taken to complete tasks.
5. That the Group undertakes a customer satisfaction survey.

Chair

Date