

BRECKLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of: Alison Webb, Executive Member for People and Information
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To: Cabinet – 16 October 2018

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Subject: Customer Access Strategy

Purpose: To implement a new strategy which aims to improve residents' experience of contacting Breckland Council while also increasing the efficiency of our overall operating arrangements

Recommend to CABINET:

- 1) That the draft Customer Access Strategy be approved.
- 2) That the strategy is implemented from April 2019, to align with the Council's new Corporate Plan.

1.0 BACKGROUND

1 The draft Customer Access Strategy has been designed to support the wider aims of the Breckland Corporate Plan and its corporate priorities. In particular to 'provide the right services, at the right time and in the right way'.

1.1 The strategy supports Breckland's ambition to transform the way in which customers – residents, businesses and visitors – are able to access information, advice and services. It builds on the work already undertaken as part of the Moving Forward Programme which has implemented a number of customer service improvements, including:

- A new, **redesigned website**, which can be accessed on smart phones and tablets, as well as desktop computers.
- Digital assistance for customers needing **help to access Council services online** through the Council's main offices at Thetford and Dereham, as well as a new customer support service offered at Attleborough, Swaffham and Watton libraries.
- Online **book and pay technology**, to provide customers with easier and more convenient ways to book and pay for Council services, while saving officer processing time.
- **'My Breckland'** online search feature, enabling customers to search by postcode for more relevant and personalised information about Council services. Eg: Bin collection days
- **Online forms**, enabling customers to communicate easily and efficiently with services, reducing response times and processing costs.
- Introducing **One Number for Breckland**, with touchtone telephone options, helping customers to get to the services and support they need as quickly as possible.

- **Co-location with DWP** (Department for Work and Pensions) at the Council's Thetford and Dereham offices, to provide a more joined-up service for shared customers.

2 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY FEEDBACK

- 2.1 The draft Customer Access Strategy was presented at a meeting of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 17 August, where a number of comments, questions and suggested changes were raised by Members.
- 2.2 In particular, some of the suggestions resulted in a number of amendments to the strategy document. In particular, these addressed Members' feedback about the proposed prioritisation of the Council's online channels over other, more traditional methods of customer contact such as telephone and face-to-face. So whilst giving prominence to digital channels – wherever possible and for those that can access services in this way – the Council will also ensure that those customers that can't – or choose not to – go online, still have a variety of ways to contact the Council.
- 2.3 By reviewing the language of the strategy, following Members' feedback, the aim of the revised strategy is to provide greater reassurance – to Members and our customers – that all channels will continue to be offered to customers, in recognition of their different needs, digital skills and preferences.

2.4 Overview and Scrutiny – final feedback

- 2.4.1 These amendments were reviewed at a subsequent meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 27 September, where Members agreed, subject to the changes being made, to recommend to Cabinet that:

- 1) The draft Customer Access Strategy be approved.
- 2) The strategy is implemented from April 2019, to align with the Council's new Corporate Plan.

3 STRATEGY

- 3.1 The strategy seeks to create modern and relevant access arrangements which are tailored to meet the needs of all Council customers, while responding positively to the financial pressures faced by the authority and to target our most personalised contact arrangements at those who are most vulnerable or have more complex needs.

3.2 Strategy ambitions

Underpinning the strategy is a set of high level ambitions which will help shape the way we manage our current customer contact handling arrangements:

- To always provide the best possible customer experience
- To provide services that are built around customers' needs
- To provide online services so good people choose to use them
- To focus on those that need support – the digital excluded
- To continually look to improve what we do through customer feedback
- Protect customer data

The strategy proposes to set a goal to increase the number of web-based interactions from their current level of 7% of total customer interactions to 50% of total customer interactions by 2022.

4 CUSTOMER INSIGHT

- 4.1 One of the drivers of the strategy is the changing habits, preferences and expectations of our customers as increasingly people are embracing new technologies and using them in their everyday lives. This can be seen in the way people now manage their finances, book a holiday or do their supermarket shopping – all of which can be done at a time that suits them, quickly and conveniently, and which in the vast majority of cases, delivers what they want.

The majority of residents access the internet on a regular basis, with 86% having been online in the last three months:

- Most have the necessary connectivity to access online services with 89% having access to broadband speeds of more than 10Mb per second.
- Many (75%) also have the basic digital skills needed to benefit from online services

- 4.2 The Council believes there is potential for more of its customers to self-serve, providing the online services it offers are easy-to-access and simple to understand. Recent experience, for example, has shown the Council that more than 80% of customers will self-serve online where the service is easy-to-use and simple to understand (Eg: Garden waste online service).

As a result, the Council wants to encourage customers, wherever possible and practical, to access services and information direct from its website (i.e. self-serve) so that we can focus our resources on those who need our help the most.

- 4.3 The Council is particularly mindful, however, that while 75% of residents have the basic digital skills needed to access services online, a further 25% of residents who don't currently have these skills should not feel disadvantaged. These customers should be supported to either develop those skills or receive the help they need in other ways, and through a variety of different channels.

Further details of how the Council proposes to do this are set out in section 5 of this report.

5.0 STRATEGY FEATURES

The strategy includes a number of key features, including:

5.1 Channel strategy

The Council will give preference to online and automated services, wherever possible, while ensuring other channels are available to those that need them.

- 5.1.2 Face-to-face support will be focused on those that need it most (ie: vulnerable customers and those with complex enquiries), but still available to customers who prefer to contact us in this way.
- 5.1.3 Phone calls will be answered promptly, but not in preference to other contact channels (telephone contact will be given equal importance to, but not preference over, other contact methods).

5.1.4 The Council will only promote one telephone number, to help resolve the majority of issues at the first point of contact – only handing off calls to services for more complex issues.

5.2 Revised customer charter

This sets out commitment to customers and our expectations of them. It also creates a set of standards for how we will acknowledge and respond to enquiries and requests, in a way that supports our channel strategy.

For example, for service requests and enquiries, online is the quickest channel to access services; letters take the longest. For complaints and FOIs, lengthier timescales allow for more detailed responses and often, more than one service needing to contribute information.

5.3 Set of digital design principles

These align to government best practice standards and have been developed so that all council departments and their staff are signed up to working in a consistent way when reviewing or redesigning services.

5.4 Digital Inclusion Strategy

This proposes how we will work with partners to improve the digital skills of our residents, as this will be critical to achieving the strategy's vision.

For example, in addition to the face-to-face support available at the Council's Thetford and Dereham offices, customer support is also being provided in Attleborough, Watton and Swaffham libraries, where customers are being supported to develop their digital skills and awareness to access information and services online.

The Council is also committing £50,000 from its Community Project Fund to offer a digital skills training programme to upskill residents and help them access better employment opportunities.

For those customers who feel unable or unwilling to increase their digital skills, access to all council services remains available by contacting the Council by telephone.

6.0 OPTIONS

6.1 Approve the Customer Access Strategy, and that it be implemented from April 2019 to align with the Council's new Corporate Plan.

6.2 Propose changes to the Customer Access Strategy.

6.3 Do nothing

7.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)

7.1 The strategy sets out a clear plan for making best use of Council resources to meet the needs of its customers, achieving value for money for the Council and its residents.

Not only does the strategy aim to improve services, it also anticipates a reduction in costs over the three-year period, through increased productivity, automation of service processes, and as more customers seek to access Council services online.

8.0 EXPECTED BENEFITS

- 8.1 By providing quicker and more efficient access to information, advice and services through digital channels, the Council will be able to provide an improved customer experience.
- 8.2 As more customers choose – and expect – to transact with the Council via its website, the Council anticipates being able to make significant savings to its customer service operations.
- 8.3 More personalised support for vulnerable customers, or those with complex enquiries, by offering appointments at a time that suits them.
- 8.4 Providing digital support to build customers' skills and confidence, enabling them to access online services.

9.0 IMPLICATIONS

In preparing this report, the report author has considered the likely implications of the decision - particularly in terms of Carbon Footprint / Environmental Issues; Constitutional & Legal; Contracts; Corporate Priorities; Crime & Disorder; Equality & Diversity/Human Rights; Financial; Health & Wellbeing; Reputation; Risk Management; Safeguarding; Staffing; Stakeholders/Consultation/Timescales; Transformation Programme; Other. Where the report author considers that there may be implications under one or more of these headings, these are identified below.

9.1 Corporate Priorities

The strategy supports the Council's Corporate Plan priority of 'providing the right service, in the right way at the right time' by providing easy access to information, advice and support through multiple access channels.

9.2 Equality and Diversity / Human Rights

9.2.1 Residents, businesses and visitors will continue to be able to contact the Council by any of the following channels:

- Web
- Telephone
- Post or email
- Face-to-face
- Social media

And the Council will contact them by web chat, telephone, post, email and social media.

9.2.2 Web:

Breckland Council's website aims to conform to Level AA of the web content accessibility guidelines of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) which particularly considers protected groups, including people with disabilities.

Breckland Council's website also features the option of a 'Recite Me' toolbar, which makes content more accessible with reading and translation support. Text can also be downloaded as an MP3 audio file.

Residents with hearing or visual impairments can view the website content in extra-large font/text to assist people with visual impairments, and sound/audio buttons are designed to benefit those with hearing impairments.

The carers (including family and friends) of older frail residents and of children and young people will benefit from transacting and finding out about services online. Many carers try to balance caring with work and careers and they will be able to access the Council 24:7.

9.2.3 Telephone:

While the strategy aims to encourage more residents to contact the Council online, it does not reduce or change residents' access to telephone contact channels to raise queries or access services. It aims to improve the current service by reducing customer demand for this channel, and therefore will be of benefit to all groups who continue use this as a way of contacting the Council.

9.2.4 Face-to-face:

Face-to-face services will be reconfigured to provide greater access to self-serve facilities and support to use these.

Face-to-face appointments will continue to be available for those who feel they need them (Eg: for more complex enquiries and more vulnerable customers) at Dereham and Thetford five days a week. And at Attleborough, Watton and Swaffham libraries, face-to-face support is currently offered two half-days a week at each location.

9.3 Financial

The strategy also takes account of the increasing financial pressures faced by local Government and the need for all councils – including Breckland Council – to ensure they are delivering services as cost-effectively as possible.

The delivery of this strategy is closely linked to the ICT and Digital Strategy 2019-2022 and its associated Digital Work Programme. Initial high-level workings indicate that a saving of approximately £70,000 by the end of year 3 could be achieved if the Council meets its target of 50% of customers contacting them via digital means.

9.4 Staffing

9.4.1 No staffing implications at this time, although a service review will be required in order to implement the strategy.

9.5 Constitution/Legal

The Customer Access Strategy does not form part of the Council's policy framework, and is consistent with the Council's Corporate Plan. There are no direct financial or staffing implications at this stage. As such, this is an executive decision which falls to the Cabinet to determine.

Certain subsequent decisions, such as the service review which affects staffing, will require Council approval.

10.0 WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED

10.1 All wards are affected by the strategy.

11.0 ACRONYMS

11.1 W3C – World Wide Web Consortium

11.2 DWP – Department for Work and Pensions

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Key Decision: No

Exempt Decision: No

This report refers to a Discretionary Service

Appendices attached to this report:

Appendix A Customer Access Strategy 2019-2022