WIRRAL

ACCESS WIRRAL

SERVICE DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS

Scrutiny Report of the Business Overview & Scrutiny Committee

FEBRUARY 2017

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APPENDICES

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1.   INTRODUCTION

At the meeting of the Business Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on 12th July 2016, the interim Director of Transformation presented a report relating to the involvement of scrutiny in reviewing new service models as they are developed. As a result, a workshop was held on 14th February 2017 for Members of the Business Overview & Scrutiny Committee to scrutinise the approach to the Access Wirral service development proposals in further detail. The session was led by Councillor Matthew Patrick through delivery of a presentation and supported by Fiona Johnstone, Director for Health and Wellbeing, Lisa Jamieson, Head of Customer Services and Pete Walker, Project Manager. The outcomes from the workshop are detailed in this report.

2.   CONTEXT OF SERVICE DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS

The Wirral Plan offers a clear direction for the Council's Customer Contact and Transactional Services, committing the authority to a programme of change through which:

- "Our services must be accessible, delivered sometimes entirely online, to reduce costs and to improve speed and efficiency"

- "We must transform how we work with residents; driving integration and being as efficient as possible, with one point of contact able to solve every resident need'.

- "We will invest in the organisation to ensure we have the right attitudes, skills and abilities in place to deliver on the promises in this plan. We will be a responsible employer who values our staff and their commitment to their work. Our staff will be clear about their roles, take responsibility, and be highly motivated and very effective in what they do".

The Access Wirral project was established to deliver this vision and forms part of the Council's Customer Experience Programme.

The Access Wirral project looks to create a customer focussed organisation that puts the customer at the heart of everything the Council does and supports them to do more for themselves. It looks to deliver a better, faster and more efficient customer services.

3. MEMBER COMMENTS

Online accessibility
In response to a query regarding the percentage of those living in Wirral who are not online, customer insight has shown that that around 82% of those living in Wirral had online access. It was suggested by officers that the increase in smartphone usage has improved online access.

A Member commented that although this project is around online access for services, many residents still prefer face-to-face contact. Statistics presented to Members as part of the presentation showed a higher percentage of residents using One Stop Shops over the Call Centre (Telephone and email) for dealing with Housing Benefit, indicating this was still the preferential method. It was suggested that this could also result in significant work to transition residents to the new way of operating. Officers acknowledged the statistical data but assured Members that contact through One Stop Shops is high primarily due to the Council requiring a lot of evidence for claims, resulting in a high number of visits being required. The implementation of Risk-Based Verification for claims and the new customer access solution should provide seamless access, removing the need for people having to make visits. Those that do visit should be the more vulnerable in Wirral who would require more support on a one to one basis.

Although assurances were received regarding the increasing number of people accessing services online, a Member commented that there needs to be some thinking around those that do not as well as the digitally excluded. The Cabinet Member informed Members of the developing Digital Strategy which aims to get 100% of all residents across Wirral to have online access. Digital champions will be created but these will emerge through community hubs and engagement with both the Volunteer Strategy and Digital Strategy. Although welcomed by Members, it was commented that streamlining processes for online users should mean that existing processes should not become or remain difficult for other groups.

CRM / Website interface
A number of comments were made around the current Customer Relationship Management system and the interface not being user friendly which the customer access solution would need to address. Members gave a number of examples, including the difficulty of trying to report street lighting. Members were informed that a Digital Manager is to be recruited as concerns around the user experience of the website are shared by officers. There are also plans to address the online facility through the implementation of the new customer access solution. Officers stated that work is already being carried now to address those issues that can be dealt with immediately with existing models, such as the website, and that positive changes will be seen very soon.

An observation was made in relation to the online sign-up to Council Tax to receive electronic billing instead of a postal delivery. Upon clicking the initial link for this service, the automated process completed the activation. It was suggested that an additional page should be incorporated into the process for the user to be provided with an understanding of what signing up will mean before committing. Officers acknowledged this and following the meeting, the suggestion has been implemented. Members also noted that the online Council Tax and Housing Benefit verification process will be launched as part of the Channel Shift work. For Council Tax, this will allow various processes, such as change of address and multi-occupancy details, to be entered online.

A number of Members commented that the Council's website was poor in terms of general navigation and the overall quality of the user experience. A number of suggestions were made for improvement and these were welcomed by officers to consider how they could be integrated into the new system. The suggestions included:

- Incorporating a simple 'key word' search function on the main home page to navigate directly to the relevant page;
- The functionality to save progress on an application as the requirement to complete it in its entirety may be too time consuming;
- A checklist function to allow the information / evidence required at the end of the process to be reviewed;
- A 'Live Chat' facility to support those who may struggle through illiteracy;
- Tutorials for uploading photographic documents; and
- Text alerts / real time online updates on the progress of an application.

Members raised issues around the number and the complexity of forms to be completed and if the transfer to online processes would result in simplification of these. Officers stated that there would be intelligence behind the forms which would only require the data it needs to process each claim. This would be based on information entered and the specific circumstances of the resident. Additionally, if users are registered for other services, forms will be prepopulated with known details, such as name and address and this will enhance the user experience. Officers acknowledged that there may be some customers who could find seeing prepopulated personal information disconcerting.

Vulnerable residents

Members emphasised the need to ensure that the most vulnerable people in Wirral would still be able to access services and that the appropriate support would be provided. Members sought assurances that the right staff to provide this support would be identified, the appropriate training would be delivered and the wellbeing of staff who would provide support would be maintained as supporting vulnerable residents can be stressful. Members also queried whether contact has been made to the various associations, such as those working with stroke and dementia, to understand how staff should be trained rather than making assumptions as to what is needed.

In response to these issues, Members were informed that a performance framework is in the process of being implemented and is centred around ensuring staff understanding what they are there to deliver, what value they add and how these would be measured. A skills gap analysis will be conducted within customer services to identify training needs. Members were informed that this will not just be around technical skills aspect but also the softer skills needed for working with vulnerable people. A Partnership Day has also been held with the involvement of a number of key stakeholders, including Public Health, the Police, Adult Social Services and other community groups to capture their views through customer scenario testing. Although Members were informed that there isn't a 'one size fits all' solution to providing additional support, officers acknowledged Members initial concerns as part of delivering the Access Wirral project.

Access Wirral roll-out

A member commented that it is important to ensure that the outcomes of the project are monitored to deliver an effective and efficient service for all residents. It was recognised that there is a risk with any major transformation project involving changes to systems and services of systems failing. It was intended that the current system would be available as a contingency so that residents do not experience any loss of service during the transition. Officers added that a sustained and measured period of performance of the new system would be required to provide assurance prior to full migration to the new system.

Members noted that research visits have been carried out to other local authorities to see how various delivery models have been implemented. Officers stated that the positive outcome from the visits was that these similar projects demonstrated that they worked. Officers also added that there was no preferred approach identified at this time for Wirral.

Members were informed that the main customer contact to the Council was for Housing Benefit and Council Tax. These would be tested as part of phase one of the roll-out of the project to demonstrate proof of concept and to identify what other forms and services could be managed through online functionality as part of a second phase.

With regard to the project's potential vehicles to deliver, a Member commented that the significant number of advantages for the 'in-house' delivery model could be perceived as being the clear preference. However, it was explained that the advantages and disadvantages are not given equal weighting and the number of these would not be a factor in the final decision as to which delivery model to adopt.

Members commented that the decision on which proposal would be taken forward should clearly demonstrate value for money and would need to be successful.

In terms of the project timescales, Members were informed that a decision will be made by Cabinet on 27th March on which option would be taken and an Implementation Plan would be developed with targets and timescales built in. The Implementation Partner, who will be employed to build the preferred system, will work with staff at each stage of implementation to ensure that the knowledge and skills to operate the system were transferred to Council staff.

Conclusions

The key messages identified from the workshop session were:

- To ensure that there is continued emphasis on those residents who are digitally excluded. Support arrangements and services for this group must be robust.

- A requirement to re-set the customer relationship and improve the reputation of the Council website and CRM system.

- To ensure front line staff receive appropriate training to provide them with skills to identify and support vulnerable residents.

- A list of specific website recommendations which would improve functionality and enhance the user experience.

Appendix 1 – Workshop Attendance

Members of the Business Overview & Scrutiny Committee:
Mike Sullivan (Chair)
Chris Blakeley
Anita Leech
Julie McManus
Denise Realey
Christine Spriggs
Jean Stapleton
Steve Williams

Officers
Lisa Jamieson – Head of Customer Services
Fiona Johnstone - Director for Health and Wellbeing
Peter Walker – Project Manager
Mike Lester – Scrutiny Officer
Patrick Torpey – Scrutiny Officer

Cabinet Members
Matthew Patrick - (Cabinet Member for Community Engagement and Communications)