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Telford & Wrekin
C O U N C I L

Addenbrooke House Ironmasters Way Telford TF3 4NT

CABINET

Date **Thursday, 8 July 2021** Time **10.00 am**
Venue **Addenbrooke House, Ironmasters Way, Telford, TF3 4NT**

Enquiries Regarding this Agenda

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Cabinet Members:

Councillor R A Overton	Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Enforcement, Community Safety and Customer Services
Councillor A J Burford	Cabinet Member for Health & Social Care
Councillor E M Callear	Cabinet Member for Leisure, Culture and Visitor Economy
Councillor L D Carter	Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood, Commercial Services and Regeneration
Councillor R C Evans	Cabinet Member for Council Finance and Governance
Councillor C Healy	Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Green Spaces, Natural and Historic Environment
Councillor S A W Reynolds	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People, Education and Lifelong Learning
Councillor P Watling	Cabinet Member for Cooperative Communities, Engagement and Partnerships
Councillor D Wright	Cabinet Member for Economy, Housing, Transport and Infrastructure
Councillor S Davies	Leader

Invitees:

Councillor W L Tomlinson	Liberal Democrats
Councillor N A Dugmore	Conservative

AGENDA

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2. **Declarations of Interest**

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http://www.telford.gov.uk/info/20243/council_meetings/365/filming_photography_recording_and_use_of_social_networking_at_meetings

CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet held on Thursday, 10 June 2021 at 10.00 am in Telford College, Haybridge Road, Wellington, Telford, TF1 2NP

PUBLISHED ON WEDNESDAY, 16 JUNE 2021

(DEADLINE FOR CALL-IN: MONDAY, 21 JUNE 2021)

Present: Councillors R A Overton (Vice-Chair), A J Burford, R C Evans, C Healy, S A W Reynolds, P Watling, D Wright and S Davies (Chair).

Also Present: Cllr W L Tomlinson (Liberal Democrats / Independent Group Leader) and Cllr N A Dugmore (Conservative Group Leader)

Apologies: Councillor E M Callear and L D Carter

CAB-78 Declarations of Interest

Councillor S Davies declared a personal and non-pecuniary interest in Item CAB-83 as the Council's representative on the Wrekin Housing Trust Board. He indicated he would not be withdrawing from the meeting during the determination of this item.

CAB-79 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting held on 27 May 2021 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

CAB-80 Leader's Announcements

The Leader announced that the Council would be receiving £22.3m from the Towns Fund. He thanked officers for their hard work in submitting the bid, which was for a significant sum, and would be used to bridge the gap between the train station and the shopping centre and beyond to Southwater. This development would include a new digital and maths hub, in collaboration with Wolverhampton University and Telford College.

CAB-81 2020/21 Financial Outturn Report

Councillor R C Evans, Cabinet Member for Council Finance & Governance presented the report of the Director: Finance & Human Resources, Chief Finance Officer.

Cabinet Members noted that despite the significant financial impacts relating to the coronavirus (CV-19) pandemic, the Council had ended the year in a positive financial position. During this unprecedented time, the Council had continued to offer all usual services (Subject to national and local restrictions),

as well as providing additional support for residents and businesses, such as distributing grant support, business rates relief, supporting vaccination roll out and the track and trace provision. The Council had not needed to use any unplanned use of reserves during 2020/21.

The gross revenue budget for 2020/21 was £414m and the net budget was £129m. The revenue outturn position was within budget with a final net underspend of £0.039m (which was equivalent to only -0.03% of net budget) after the proposed transfers to reserves and balances had been made. This position had been achieved after delivering £2.9m of budget savings in 2020/21, on top of the £123.5m made since 2009/10 years giving a total of £126.4m- equivalent to around £700 for every home in the Borough.

The funding outlook for the medium term was very uncertain. The Government had confirmed that, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the planned review of local government finance system would be postponed, however, changes to the New Homes Bonus system would come into effect during 2022/23. However, there had been no confirmation of the funding levels for 2022/23, and it was anticipated that the Council would need to deliver £8.8m savings already identified for 2021/22 and 2022/23, plus an additional £10.7m of further savings over the two years 2022/23 and 2023/24.

The key areas of pressures during 2020/21 were noted. Several areas of pressure were highlighted, including children's safeguarding, adult social care and communities, customer and commercial services.

The Capital Outturn position 2020/21 was noted; capital spend ended the year at £57.71m against an approved estimate of £63.7m which was largely due to re-phasing expenditure into 2021/22.

NuPlace was a separate legal entity and as such prepared its own accounts but as NuPlace was wholly owned by the Council, consolidated group accounts were also prepared. The unaudited accounts showed that NuPlace had generated an operating profit after interest and taxation of £0.463 in 2020/21, and was expected to issue a dividend of £0.156m during the year to the council as the sole investor. The Council also received income from NuPlace totalling £1.5m during 2020/21 net of additional interest and other marginal costs.

It was reported that the draft formal statement of accounts were considered at the Audit committee at the end of May and would be audited by Grant Thornton, the Council's external auditors, during June and July, the accounts would also be available for public inspection for 30 working days.

Members welcomed the report and stated it was a tremendous achievement in the circumstances of Covid-19 and over a decade of government cuts. Members expressed their thanks to officers for their hard work in producing the budget.

RESOLVED to RECOMMEND to COUNCIL that –

- (a) the Revenue outturn position for 2020/21 and related virements in Appendix 3 of the report which is subject to audit by the Council's external auditors be approved;**
- (b) the transfers and changes to reserves and associated approval to the relevant members of the Senior Management Team (as determined by the Chief Executive) and after consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member to spend the reserves as detailed in section 5 of the report and Appendix 5 of the report be approved ;**
- (c) the Capital outturn position and related supplementary estimates, re-phasing and virements shown in Appendix 4 of the report and as summarised in the report be approved;**
- (d) that delegated authority be granted to the Director: Finance & HR to make any changes required as the outturn is finalised in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Council Finance and Governance;**
- (e) the performance against income targets be noted; and**
- (f) the 2021/22 Public Health Grant be approved and the 2021/22 budget strategy be updated accordingly**

CAB-82 Tree & Woodland Management Policy and Ash Dieback Management Programme

Councillor C Healy, Cabinet Member for Visitor Economy, Historic and Natural Environment and Climate Change presented the report of the Director of Neighbourhood and Enforcement Services.

The Borough had significantly more trees than many other towns and cities and it was estimated that the Council was responsible for around 15 million trees. The Council had recently launched the 'Trees4TW' scheme, where 8,600 trees were provided to local residents, schools and landowners to plant as part of the fight against climate change.

The Council would continue to support planting of trees and aimed to mitigate the loss of trees through Ash die back, other disease or storm damage. The report sought the agreement for additional resources to survey trees within the borough and to undertake safety works as required.

The Leader of The Liberal Democrat / Independent Group expressed his thanks to the Council's Tree Officers and noted the vital work the Council was undertaking with partner organisations regarding green spaces in the Borough. He raised that he would like to see the Council offer support to residents who due to means or capacity were not able to manage neighbouring trees themselves, comments which were echoed by the Leader

of the Conservative Group. The Cabinet Member for Visitor Economy, Historic and Natural Environment and Climate Change stated agreed that there needed to be a balance of where the Council was able to support residents where it was needed, however, recognising the budget pressures this would incur.

RESOLVED that –

- a) the amendments to the Tree and Woodland Management Policy as set out in Appendix 1 of the report be approved
- b) the progress to date be noted and the approach to the management of trees and woodlands within the Council's ownership be endorsed
- c) authority be delegated to the Director of Neighbourhood and Enforcement Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Green Spaces, Natural and Historic Environment and the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood, Commercial Services and Regeneration, to secure £150,000 for the financial years 2021/22 only to undertake condition surveys and priority works in the management of Ash dieback
- d) authority be delegated to the Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Green Spaces, Natural and Historic Environment to see funding opportunities for Ash dieback since withdrawal of funding by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) following in March 2020.

CAB-83 Housing Investment Programme - Telford & Wrekin Homes

Councillor D Wright, The Cabinet Member for Economy, Housing, Transport and Infrastructure presented the report of the Director for Prosperity and Investment.

The report provided an update in relation to the Housing Investment Programme. The report updated on the acquisition of around 100 existing homes for affordable and private rent, presented branding for the scheme and sets out proposals for increasing the scheme.

Telford & Wrekin Homes builds on the strengths of Nuplace. The objectives of Telford & Wrekin Homes were to protect existing housing stock, to raise standards in the private rented sector and to provide a range of housing options for priority groups in the Borough, for example care leavers and veterans.

Members welcomed the report and stated that the scheme would help to build communities. Members noted that they received complaints regarding poor landlords, although there were many excellent landlords in the Borough.

In response to a question from the Conservative Group Leader, The Cabinet Member for Economy, Housing, Transport and Infrastructure stated that the valuer appointed was to provide a starting point valuation. Telford & Wrekin

Homes, as well as Nuplace, needed to provide a balance between providing market rent and affordable properties as the schemes needed to be sustainable long term.

RESOLVED that –

- a) the progress made to date in relation to Telford & Wrekin Homes and the acquisition of the first tranche of properties be noted**
- b) the branding proposals for Telford & Wrekin Homes be approved.**

CAB-84 Telford & Wrekin Council Digital Strategy

Councillor R A Overton, Cabinet Member for Enforcement, Community Safety and Customer Services presented the report of the Director of Communities, Customer and Commercial Services. The report sought approval for a new Digital Strategy.

The strategy was set into 4 themes; digital customers, digital communities, digital place and digital workforce. The strategy aimed to maximise the potential of digital technology in how the Council communicated and interacted with residents, customers and partner organisations, whilst recognising that not everyone is able to access digital methods. The Council would always be accessible to everyone.

Members welcomed the report, in particular the inclusion of those for whom digital methods were not easy, it was noted that this was not just the elderly population, but those who were on low or modest incomes could struggle to access the internet. The Council offered free wifi in community centres.

RESOLVED that –

- a) the new Digital Strategy attached at Appendix A of the report be approved**
- b) authority be delegated to the Director: Communities, Customer and Commercial Services (and any officer authorised in writing by this director) in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Enforcement, Community Safety and Customer Services to take the necessary steps to implement these recommendations.**

The meeting ended at 11.02 am

Signed for the purposes of the Decision Notices

Anthea Lowe

Associate Director: Policy & Governance
Date: **Wednesday, 16 JUNE 2021**

Signed

Date: Thursday, 8 July 2021

TELFORD & WREKIN COUNCIL

CABINET – 8 JULY 2021
COUNCIL – 22 JULY 2021

2021/22 FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR: FINANCE & H.R. (CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER)

LEAD CABINET MEMBER: CLLR RAE EVANS

PART A) – SUMMARY REPORT

1.0 SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES

1.1 2021/22 Revenue

This is the first Financial Monitoring Report for 2021/22, as expected, there are some residual Covid-19 pressures including income shortfalls in relation to restricted opening at facilities in the early part of the year and potential impacts on business rates collection, which is a key funding stream for the Council. It is still too early in the year to make accurate predictions of the ongoing impact of Coronavirus and how quickly the economy will recover; the position will continue to be monitored and updates provided throughout the year.

The projected service pressures are currently £4.24m. Adding the £1m anticipated funding shortfalls relating to business rates (which will result in a deficit balance carried forward to next year on the collection fund) takes the total pressure to £5.24m against which the £5.18m emergency response funding will be applied leaving a residual current projection of an overspend of £0.06m. by year end. This is prior to using the Council's budget contingency. It is very early in the year and projections will be updated and refined, taking into account the release of lockdown and any residual impact of Covid-19 on service areas.

Summary	£m
Projected total pressure on service budgets	+4.244
add estimated shortfall relating to business rates	+1.000
Total pressure	+5.244
Emergency response funding	(5.179)
Net Position	+0.065

There are a number of variations from the approved budget. As expected many of these continue the trend seen last year and relate to Covid-19. Projections will be refined and updated as the year progresses, the key variances are shown below:

Children’s Safeguarding & Family Support – Children in Care Placement costs, such as additional children with complex needs coming into care and increased placement fees	£0.689m
Education & Skills – additional home to school transport costs (pre and post 16)	£0.511m
Adult Social Care – increased costs currently projected in relation to long term care purchasing	£1.955m
Homelessness prevention costs	£0.259m
Income losses, such as	
- Property Investment Portfolio - rental income shortfalls	£0.132m
- Leisure income	£0.782m
- Car parking income	£0.088m
- Arthog	£0.259m

As well as the potential ongoing impact of Covid-19, the funding outlook for the medium term is still very uncertain due to the impact of the major changes to the Local Government Finance System being deferred until at least April 2022 but with no confirmed date for implementation; changes to the New Homes bonus system, expected to come into force in 2022/23; and changes to the Adult Social Care (ASC) funding through the long awaited ASC Green paper also expected at some point. Further, it is unclear whether the Government will announce another one year “spending round” or a medium-term Comprehensive Spending Review later this year which will inform the Council’s 2022/23 and medium term Service & Financial Planning Strategy. However, it is very likely that with the significant increase in the Government’s debt as a result of responding to the pandemic that the financial climate ahead will still be one of significant financial challenge over the medium-term for local authorities.

1.2 **Capital**

The capital programme totals £87m for 2021/22 which includes all approvals since the budget was set. At the time of compiling this report projected spend was 86% of the budget allocation. Historically spend is geared towards the end of the year; any ongoing impact of Covid-19 will be monitored and projections updated as more information becomes available.

1.3 **Corporate Income Collection**

Covid-19 continues to have an impact on collection rates in 2021/22 with income collected in relation to Business Rates and Sales Ledger currently behind the targets set but Council Tax collection currently in line with targets set.

It is difficult to predict the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on income collection and the position will be closely monitored during the year. Ultimately, all debt will be pursued and will continue to be collected

after the end of the financial year with all appropriate recovery avenues being pursued.

Business Rates – the total amount to be collected has reduced by around £24m as a result of the Government providing a continued discount to those in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors (3 months relief at 100% and 66% relief from July onwards). Collection throughout the year will be heavily influenced by the national response to the pandemic.

It is very early in the year to make full year projections, however current indications are that Council Tax collection will remain positive throughout the year, and a potential shortfall of around 3% is currently predicted in relation to business rates. This will impact on cashflow in 2021/22 and the budget in 2022/23 as any deficit falls on the collection fund. As mentioned above the position will be closely monitored.

- 1.4 The Councillors Pride Fund was established in 2015/16, with each ward member receiving £2k per year to allocate to projects that will benefit their local area. Funds have supported community self-help and have strengthened the capacity within communities. Due to the successful outcomes the scheme has delivered and positive feedback from ward members, Town & Parish Councils, and the community, the allocation for 2021/22 and 2022/23 will increase to £5k per ward member.

2.0 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Members are asked to:-

- (i) Note the 2021/22 revenue budget position which continues to be impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic
- (ii) Approve the increase in the Councillors Pride Fund to £5k per ward member for 2021/22 and 2022/23
- (iii) Note the position in relation to capital spend and recommend that Full Council approve the changes to the capital programme detailed in Appendix 3
- (iv) Note the collection rates for NNDR, council tax and sales ledger

3.0 **SUMMARY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

COMMUNITY IMPACT	Do these proposals contribute to specific Co-operative Council priorities?	
	Yes	Delivery of all priorities depend on the

		effective use of available resources. Regular financial monitoring in the financial management reports helps to highlight variations from plan so that action can be taken to effectively manage the Council's budget.
		Will the proposals impact on specific groups of people?
	No	
TARGET COMPLETION/DELIVERY DATE	To outturn within the budget set for 2021/22 at 31/3/22.	
FINANCIAL/VALUE FOR MONEY IMPACT	Yes	The financial impacts are detailed throughout the report.
LEGAL ISSUES	No	None directly arising from this report. The S151 Officer has a statutory duty to monitor income and expenditure and ensure that the Council takes action if overall net overspends /shortfalls emerge.
OTHER IMPACTS, RISKS & OPPORTUNITIES	No	Budget holders actively manage their budgets and the many financial risks and challenges that council services face, examples include the risk of a particularly harsh winter which would impact adversely on the winter gritting and adult social care budgets, the increasing dependency on income from a wide range of activities and the risk of interest rate movements. The Council has comprehensive risk management arrangements in place, which are reviewed and updated by the Senior Management Team.
IMPACT ON SPECIFIC WARDS	No	

PART B) – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

4.0 2021/22 REVENUE BUDGET

- 4.1 Financial management is the responsibility of budget holders and is supported by Finance staff using a risk based approach: following considerable reductions in finance resources through savings exercises in previous years, more focus is given to higher risk areas (high value/more volatile); less frequent financial monitoring is undertaken on budgets deemed to be medium to lower risk.

4.2 The overall 2021/22 budget position is summarised in the table below:

Service Area	Net Revenue Budget	Total Current Variations
	£'000	£'000
Prosperity & Investment	(5,039)	443
Finance & H.R.	12,786	(1,058)
Policy & Governance	849	0
Children's Safeguarding & Family Support	37,153	1,148
Education & Skills	11,941	802
Adult Social Care	49,021	1,982
Health, Wellbeing & Commissioning	2,045	0
Neighbourhood & Enforcement Services	30,419	(218)
Communities, Customer & Commercial Services	3,787	974
Housing, Employment & Infrastructure	1,991	261
Corporate Communications	0	0
Council Wide (incl. Covid Funding)	(13,939)	(5,269)
Overall Service Pressure	131,014	(935)
Council Tax/Business Rates impact		1,000
Total including CT and Rates	131,014	65

4.3 Projected variances over £0.250m are highlighted below, all other variances over £50k are detailed in Appendix 2.

Service Area	Variance £m
<p><u>Property & Investment</u></p> <p>There are currently no variances over £0.250m to report.</p> <p>Covid-19 continues to impact in some areas including PIP rental income and Carpark income due to the lockdown measures in quarter 1 and gradual recovery. The position will continue to be closely monitored.</p>	
<p><u>Children's Safeguarding & Family Support</u></p> <p>Children In Care Placements –The placement budget model is currently being reviewed and updated based on the latest information relating to new placements and leavers and projections will be updated following this.</p> <p>Staffing – This reflects the additional costs associated with the Family Safeguarding initiative (see reserve contribution below)</p>	<p>+0.689</p> <p>+0.239</p>

<p>together with maternity and sickness absence cover mainly through the use of agency.</p> <p>Contribution from Reserves – funding from reserves which will cover costs of the Family Safeguarding initiative and part-mitigates staffing overspends above.</p> <p>Health Funding – Following discussions with the CCG, health representatives will commence attendance at RAMP Panel later this month and will be involved in all discussions where the service considers there to be a requirement for funding linked to health needs. The aim is to increase the current level of forecast contributions.</p>	<p>-0.287</p> <p>+0.320</p>
<p><u>Education & Skills</u></p>	
<p>Home to School Transport – Significant work, including the introduction of a revised Home to School Transport policy, has taken place over recent years to address and stabilise the pressure on this budget which was experiencing year on year growth in cost. This has been achieved despite increasing pupil numbers. The projected overspend, at this stage of the year, reflects the traditional pattern of expenditure. This projection will change during the year as the revised policy continues to be implemented for new cohorts of pupils and more information becomes available on the impact of COVID-19 this year. Work continues now to reduce costs further by minimising the use of high cost providers and providing support that focuses on enabling our families and young people to travel to their educational setting as independently and cost effectively as possible.</p> <p>Arthog – Summer term bookings continue to be impacted by Covid-19 restrictions. The current projection is based on restrictions being lifted by the Autumn and a more normal pattern of activity resuming.</p>	<p>+0.400</p> <p>+0.259</p>
<p><u>Adult Social Care</u></p>	
<p>Purchasing, Long Term Care –current forecast; work is underway to refine projections.</p>	<p>+1.955</p>
<p><u>Communities, Customer & Commercial Services</u></p>	
<p>Leisure Operations – loss of budgeted income relating to closures required due to Covid-19 in the first quarter of the year.</p>	<p>+0.782</p>
<p><u>Housing, Employment & Infrastructure</u></p>	
<p>Homelessness – costs associated with preventing homelessness; this is an improved position from last year as a result of the</p>	<p>+0.259</p>

anticipated benefit from the Next Steps Programme.	
<u>Finance & Human Resources</u>	
Treasury – initial estimate of savings arising from continued borrowing at lower than budgeted short term interest rates. This projection will be updated as the year progresses and more detailed monitoring is undertaken.	-1.100

5.0 **CONTINGENCIES**

5.1 The 2021/22 budget includes general contingencies £3.95m, (£1.25m is held specifically for ASC and Children’s Safeguarding). The contingency is set aside to meet any unforeseen expenditure, or delays in phasing in the savings that the Council has to deliver this year. Clearly it is still very early in the financial year and many other challenges may arise for the Council during the remainder of 2021/22, it would not therefore be prudent to allocate the contingency at this early point in the year. There is also an amount held centrally for contractual inflation totalling 0.6m which forms part of the approved revenue budget and will only be allocated to specific budgets when the relevant inflation information is available. The Council also has General and Special Fund Balances and some balances earmarked to support the medium term strategy. A measured approach to using balances will be adopted to protect future financial sustainability.

6.0 **CAPITAL**

6.1 **2021/22 Capital Programme**

The capital programme totals £87.15m, which includes the approvals proposed in this report. The financial position is shown in the table below which shows projected spend is currently at £75.3m.

Service Area	Current Budget	Spend to Date	% Spend	Year End Projection
	£m	£m		£m
Prosperity & Investment	30.74	1.33	4.32%	26.29
Policy & Governance	0.12	0.00	0.00%	0.06
Education & Skills	13.16	0.56	4.28%	13.16
Adult Social Care	0.12	0.02	16.79%	0.04
Health, Wellbeing & Commissioning	0.07	0.00	0.00%	0.00
Neighbourhood & Enforcement Services	22.11	0.66	2.96%	21.80
Communities, Customer & Commercial	6.16	0.24	3.88%	3.70
Housing, Employment & Infrastructure	12.57	0.75	5.95%	8.21
Finance & HR	0.10	0.00	0.00%	0.10
Corporate Items	2.00	0.00	0.00%	2.00
	87.15	3.56	4.08%	75.34

6.2 The 2021/22 capital programme relies on £8.8m of receipts as part of its funding (after adjusting for known changes). Capital receipts included in the medium term budget strategy are under continual review and any changes will be reflected in future budget projections but are currently projected to be on target.

7.0 CORPORATE INCOME MONITORING

7.1 The Council's budget includes significant income streams which are regularly monitored to ensure they are on track to achieve targets that have been set and so that remedial action can be taken at an early stage. The three main areas are Council Tax, NNDR (business rates) and Sales Ledger. Current monitoring information relating to these is provided below. The Council pursues outstanding debt vigorously, until all possible recovery avenues have been exhausted, but also prudently provides for bad debts in its accounts.

7.2 In summary, council tax collection is on target but sales ledger and NNDR collection are currently slightly behind target.

INCOME COLLECTION – APRIL 2021			
	Actual	Target	Performance
Council Tax Collection	10.19%	10.19%	On target
NNDR Collection	11.68%	14.71%	3.03% behind target
Sales Ledger Outstanding Debt	5.80%	4.70%	1.1% outside target

7.3 **Council Tax (£99.1m)**

The percentage of the current year liability for council tax which the authority should have received during the year, as a percentage of annual collectable debit. The measure does not take account of debt that continues to be pursued and collected after the end of the financial year in which it became due. The final collection figure for all financial years exceeds 99%.

Year End performance 2020/21	97.09%
Year End Target for 2021/22	97.03%

Performance is cumulative during the year and expressed against the complete year's debit.

Month End Target	Month End Actual	Last year Actual
10.19%	10.19%	8.78%

Collection rates are on target for council tax.

7.4 **NNDR-Business Rates (£53.6m)**

The % of business rates for 2021/22 that should have been collected during the year. This target, as for council tax, ignores our continuing collection of earlier years' liabilities.

The measure does not take into account the debt that continues to be pursued and collected after the end of the financial year in which it became due. As a general rule the final collection figure for any financial year exceeds 99%.

Year End performance 2020/21	96.34%
Year End Target for 2021/22	97.60%

Month End Target	Month End Actual	Last year Actual
14.71%	11.68%	7.70%

The amount collectable has reduced by around £24m as a result of the Government providing a continued discount to those in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. Collection rates have improved since this time last year. Collection throughout the year will be heavily influenced by the national response to the pandemic, and the implications for our businesses.

7.5 **Sales Ledger (£65.9m)**

This includes general debt and Social Care debt. Debt below 2 months is classified as a normal credit period.

The target percentage is set relating cumulative debt outstanding from all years to the current annual debit. The targets and performance of income collection for 2021/22 are as follows:

	Annual Target %	Apr 2021	
		£m	%
Total	4.70	3,842	5.83%

Sales ledger performance is outside target, and we continue to invoice and follow the recovery process on all outstanding debt.

8.0 **PREVIOUS MINUTES**

04/03/2021 – Council, Service & Financial Planning Strategy
10/06/2021 - Cabinet, 2020/21 Outturn Report

9.0 **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

2020/21 Financial Ledger reports
2020/21 Service & Financial Planning Report

Report Prepared by:

Ken Clarke, Director: Finance & HR (Chief Financial Officer) – 01952 383100;

Pauline Harris, Corporate Finance Manager – 01952 383701

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Summary of 2021/22 Projected Variations

Service Area	Net Revenue Budget	Total Current Variation
	£	£
Prosperity & Investment	(5,038,780)	442,560
Finance & HR	12,785,954	(1,058,000)
Policy & Governance	849,311	0
Children's Safeguarding & Family Support	37,152,549	1,148,450
Education & Skills	11,941,154	801,848
Adult Social Care	49,021,086	1,982,407
Health, Wellbeing & Commissioning	2,044,762	0
Neighbourhood & Enforcement Services	30,418,691	(218,181)
Communities, Customer & Commercial Services	3,787,213	974,322
Housing, Employment & Infrastructure	1,990,781	261,150
Corporate Communications	0	0
Council Wide (incl. Covid Funding)	(13,939,135)	(5,268,982)
	131,013,585	(934,426)
Council Tax/Business Rates impact		1,000,000
Total	131,013,585	65,574

2021/22 Revenue Budget Variations over £50,000				
Description		Budget	Total Variation	Comments
		£	£	
Prosperity & Investment				
BIT	Admin Buildings	1,849,640	107,000	Undeliverable saving, alternative options to be considered but has been stalled due to Covid lockdown.
	Operational Properties	39,960	30,802	Additional cleansing required at Ironbridge toilets to maintain Covid safety standards.
R&I	PIP Income	(6,826,202)	132,000	Estimated impact of rent reductions as a result of Covid implications. Service area has received some specific requests for rent reductions and will continue to monitor the position.
	Car Park income	(294,840)	88,000	Southwater and Hall Court Car Park reduced income reflecting the latest covid lockdown period and gradual return of businesses and retail to centre. Assumes normality returns from August.
	Granville Depot	65,100	73,587	Ongoing pressure with this site transferred from Neighbourhood Services. Options currently being reviewed to aid mitigation ongoing.
Other under £50k		127,562	11,171	
Total Prosperity & Investment		(5,038,780)	442,560	
Finance & HR				
Treasury		10,514,589	(1,100,000)	Benefit arising from current low interest rates and strategy to use temporary borrowing at lower than budgeted interest rates.
Variations Under £50k		2,271,365	42,000	Projected overspend in respect of the External Audit Fee for 2020/21 additional and projected 2021/22
Total Finance & HR		12,785,954	(1,058,000)	
Policy & Governance				
Variations Under £50k		849,311	0	
Total Policy & Governance		849,311	0	
Children's Safeguarding & Family Support				
CIC Placements		17,389,447	688,833	The placement budget is based on a detailed model which reflects anticipated placement numbers and costs. Work is ongoing to review the current projections and reflect the latest information available for planned cessations (adoption, stepdown, reunification). Whilst current projections reflect the existing LAC cohort through to year end - there is inevitable fluidity within this cohort and so further detailed work is being undertaken to ensure that all assumptions going forward are as robust as possible and that this position is reflected in the monitoring.
Post 18 Staying Put & Leaving Care Support		428,208	3,119	This area is currently projected at close to budget but will form part of the budget model review referred to above

2021/22 Revenue Budget Variations over £50,000				
Description		Budget	Total Variation	Comments
		£	£	
Staffing - salaries		12,393,470	162,838	This projection reflects a net position after taking into account the costs associated with new initiatives which are offset by short term vacancies and the impact on salary costs of maternity leave within the service. This cost and that of Agency cover is offset by the increased contribution from reserves.
Staffing - Agency Costs		160,400	76,028	Agency staff are covering maternity/sickness absence in the service. As the year
Children with Disabilities		1,198,298	0	This area spent less in 2020/21 than the 2021/22 budget, but it is expected that as CV19 restrictions reduce, activity will return to more usual levels.
Children in Care Adoption Allowances		291,400	4,960	
Joint Adoption Service		774,417	0	The 2021/22 outturn for this area will potentially be impacted by the ongoing review of the Adoption Support Fund being undertaken by Shropshire, as this will determine whether the current assumptions for monies claimed but needing to be returned are accurate.
Contribution from Reserves		(578,991)	(286,838)	Funds from reserves will cover the costs of the Family Safeguarding initiative which commences this year (see staffing variation above).
Health Funding		(400,000)	320,962	Forecast based on last year's contribution. Following discussions with the CCG, health representatives will commence attendance at RAMP Panel later this month and will be involved in all discussions where the service considers there to be a requirement for funding linked to health needs.
Under £50k		4,629,610	181,188	
TOTAL		36,286,260	1,151,091	
Independent Review - Staffing		672,440	(3,639)	
Independent Review - Under £50k		193,849	998	
Total Children's Safeguarding & Family Support		37,152,549	1,148,450	
Education & Skills				
Home to school transport		2,912,832	400,000	At this early stage of the year, there is considerable uncertainty concerning the projections, as home to school transport is fundamentally impacted by CV19 regulations concerning social distancing with the consequent impact upon the extent of parental transport and reimbursements, etc. In addition, until transport arrangements for the new school year are clear, whole financial year forecasts are difficult to formulate. The current projected overspend is based upon the historic budget situation of home to school transport, which has been that budgeted savings have proven difficult to achieve in the context of high needs pressures (a large majority of home to school transport relates to pupils with high needs) and an assumption of a at least a partial return to pre CV19 transport conditions from the Autumn.
Post 16 transport		295,970	110,923	There is an existing pressure in this area, due to a number of post 16 young people with high needs needing individual transport arrangements. As with pre 16 transport, the projected position for the financial year will become clearer in the Autumn once the new academic year arrangements are in place.

2021/22 Revenue Budget Variations over £50,000				
Description		Budget	Total Variation	Comments
		£	£	
Arthog		272,106	258,671	Summer term bookings for Arthog continue to be fundamentally impacted by restrictions caused by CV19. For the past year, Arthog's ability to operate has been severely restricted. The financial projections currently assume that these restrictions are lifted by the Autumn and that a more normal pattern of activity can be resumed.
Variation under £50K		8,460,246	32,254	
Total Education & Skills		11,941,154	801,848	
Adult Social Care				
Long Term Care Purchasing	Residential/Residential(Dementia) care, Nursing/Nursing (Dementia) care, Homecare, Direct Payments, Shared Lives, Supported Accommodation and Supported Living, Daycare: Spot and Block contracts	52,811,604	1,955,407	Long Term Care expenditure pressure currently forecast. Work is underway to determine whether this is arising from demand, complexity or increasing rates being charged for care. This is expected to grow as the year progresses. The budget i.e. being re-based to determine what the likely profile of expenditure is likely to be in this year
Variation under £50K		(3,790,518)	27,000	Shortfall on savings from restructure down to delay in implementation
Total Adult Social Care		49,021,086	1,982,407	
Health, Wellbeing & Commissioning				
Variation under £50K		2,044,762	0	The first period's monitoring reveals no significant variations. Some savings and restructure implementations will only deliver part year however these are expected to be covered by underspends resulting in a nil overall variation. Details to be reported once evaluated
Total Health, Wellbeing & Commissioning		2,044,762	0	
Neighbourhood & Enforcement Services				
Street Sweeping	Various	306,750	(75,271)	Lower disposal costs relating to street sweepings. To be reviewed through the year.
New Roads & Streetworks Act	Various	(444,780)	(75,468)	Income received projected over and above income target for NRSWA. This income will be use to support investment into the highway network and associated assets.
Variations Under £50k		30,556,721	(67,442)	
Total Neighbourhood & Enforcement Services		30,418,691	(218,181)	
Communities, Customer & Commercial Services				
Leisure	Income	(5,793,294)	781,569	Net shortfall projected against income due to the impact of closures and social distancing restrictions during Q1 as a result of Covid.
ICT - Corporate Income	Income	(332,345)	148,815	Shortfall anticipated against project income

2021/22 Revenue Budget Variations over £50,000				
Description		Budget	Total Variation	Comments
		£	£	
ICT - External	Various	(54)	56,198	Projected shortfall in income due to the loss of business from Schools, offset by reduction in Microsoft Enterprise Agreement below.
ICT - PC Replacement Programme	Supplies & Services	480,795	(71,771)	Reduction in costs of the Microsoft Enterprise Agreement for 2021/22
ICT - MFD's	Various	(104,191)	66,984	Shortfall against income from MFD's due to lower printing volumes as a result of home working. This loss assumes that staff return to the office for 2 days a week from the end of July. Corresponding underspends will be held within Service budgets.
Other variations under £50k		9,536,301	(7,472)	
Total Communities, Customer & Commercial Services		3,787,213	974,322	
Housing, Employment & Infrastructure				
Housing	Homelessness	317,320	259,070	Homelessness gross cost of £401k estimated for the provision of Prevention and Bed & Breakfast associated with 'Everyone In' including NRPF (no recourse to public funds) clients, offset by Housing Benefit income of (£142k). This is an improved position from last year as a result of the anticipated benefit of the Next Steps programme from MHCLG.
Other under £50k		1,673,461	2,080	
Total Housing, Employment & Infrastructure		1,990,781	261,150	
Corporate Communications				
Total Corporate Communications		0	0	
Corporate				
Council Wide Items (incl. Covid Funding)		(13,939,135)	(5,178,982)	
Shropshire Pension Fund	Compensation payments		(90,000)	Projection based on 20/21 outturn
Total Corporate		(13,939,135)	(5,268,982)	
Total		131,013,585	(934,426)	

Capital Approvals - by Service Area

Appendix 3

Slippage							
Scheme	Service Area	Funding Source	21/22 £	22/23 £	23/24 £	Later Yrs £	
HE Liability Sites	Prosperity & Investment	External	(3,736,587.72)	3,736,587.72			
HE Land Deal	Prosperity & Investment	External	(205,397.45)	205,397.45		-	
Property Investment Portfoio	Prosperity & Investment	Prudential	(6,647,824.00)	6,647,824.00			
Property Investment Portfoio	Prosperity & Investment	Capital Receipts	(79,718.54)	79,718.54			
Property Investment Portfoio	Prosperity & Investment	Revenue	(575,281.46)	575,281.46			
Housing Company - Housing	Prosperity & Investment	Prudential	(10,204,082.00)	(8,900,000.00)	9,200,000.00		9,904,082.00
Telford Growth Package	Customer & Neighbourhood Enforcement	External	(2,131,033.95)	2,131,033.95			
Telford Growth Package	Customer & Neighbourhood Enforcement	Prudential	(67,141.25)	67,141.25			
Efficiency Schemes Capitalisation	Corporate Items	Capital Receipts	(2,222,221.18)	2,222,221.18			
Managing the Funding of the Capital Programme	Corporate Items	Capital Receipts	2,141,997.13	(2,141,997.13)	(500,000.00)		500,000
Managing the Funding of the Capital Programme	Corporate Items	Prudential	(2,141,997.13)	2,141,997.13	500,000.00		(500,000.00)
All Other School Schemes	Education & Skills	Grant	(8,542,430.74)	8,542,430.74			
All Other School Schemes	Education & Skills	Capital Receipts	(1,290,057.41)	1,290,057.41			
Total			(35,701,775.70)	16,597,693.70	9,200,000.00		9,904,082.00

New Allocations							
Scheme	Service Area	Funding Source	21/22 £	22/23 £	23/24 £	Later Yrs £	
All Other School Schemes	Education & Skills	Grant	3,227,415.79				
All Other School Schemes	Education & Skills	External	5,168.00				
Land Deal Board Schemes	Prosperity & Investment	External	176,098.00	39,000.00	679,397.05		
HE Land Deal	Prosperity & Investment	External	0.00	369,762.55	280,160.00		
Housing DFG	Housing, Employment & Infrastructure	Grant	2,306,755.00				
Superfast Broadband Programme	Housing, Employment & Infrastructure	Revenue	29,000.00				
Housing	Housing, Employment & Infrastructure	External	237,193.00				
Total			5,981,629.79	408,762.55	959,557.05		0.00

Virements							
Scheme	Service Area	Funding Source	21/22 £	22/23 £	23/24 £	Later Yrs £	
Highways / Footpaths	Customer & Neighbourhood Enforcement	Grant	(40,000.00)				
Rights of Way	Property & Investment	Grant	40,000.00				
Total			0.00	0.00	0.00		0.00

TELFORD & WREKIN COUNCIL

CABINET 8TH JULY

PRIDE IN OUR HIGH STREETS – SUPPORTING BUSINESS

REPORT OF DIRECTOR: HOUSING, EMPLOYMENT AND
INFRASTRUCTURE

LEAD CABINET MEMBER – CLLR LEE CARTER

PART A) – SUMMARY REPORT

1. SUMMARY OF MAIN PROPOSALS

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the successful delivery of the second phase of the Pride in Our High Streets (PIOHS) Programme 2018-2021 which has received national recognition as a model of best practice. The report then sets out a creative and ambitious blueprint for the delivery of a third Programme phase. **This will see £4.8m invested over the next two years with an initial funding package of £2.5m to be invested in 2021/22.**
- 1.2 **PIOHS has had a visible and lasting impact on our high streets with 30 empty retail premises brought back into use creating more than 100 local high street jobs to date (and many more in the supply chain) and leveraging more than £1.32m of private sector investment.** Investment into façade improvements has seen the **transformation of many shop frontages to give our high streets visual appeal and the existing programme has also seen businesses supported to diversify and support for start-ups to help recovery from Covid.** Through the Young High Street Challenge **over 1000 young people have been directly engaged in the future of our high streets.** Since 12th April the Council, working with town and parish councils has established a programme of activity to promote and celebrate our High Streets as the latest lockdown is eased encouraging residents to be 'loyal to local'.
- 1.3 Despite this success our high streets face continued challenges. These include: long term empty units/high levels of occupant turnover and a shrinking retail offer driven by the rise in on-line shopping; absentee landlords; mixed quality redevelopment and conversions into living space; and, in some instances, problems of anti-social behaviour.
- 1.4 PIOHS 2021-2023 recognises these continuing problems and sets high street regeneration in a new context reflecting the on-going impact of COVID and the continued growth of on-line shopping which poses both challenges and also new opportunities. The new PIOHS programme will consolidate and build on success maintaining elements of the existing programme alongside

new initiatives including **new digital and environmental grant schemes, a property improvement voucher scheme, improvements to the public realm and initiatives that will enhance our high streets as more than retail destinations.**

- 1.5 **The programme will include establishing Place Plans for each of our 6 borough town high streets working with T&PC and local stakeholders.** These Plans will identify the key challenges and opportunities based on the specific needs of each Borough Town informed by data about the High Street to create a clear vision and set of local investment priorities. **Plans will link in to the other PiOHS programmes and Council led initiatives including Pride in Our Parks and the Council’s events programme.**
- 1.6 Informed by the Place Plans to sustain delivery **PIOHS will identify opportunities for the Council to acquire high street assets for renovation and then either sale or rent, the profits from which will form the basis of a ‘revolving investment fund’ for on-going high street investment.**
- 1.7 PIOHS will also establish a **viability gap fund to encourage private sector re-development of long empty retail premises.** This will incorporate a ‘pay-back’ mechanism to secure developer contributions to the revolving investment fund and support the growth of private sector investment that has already been stimulated via PiOHS to date, particularly, in Wellington.
- 1.8 Through these mechanism **PIOHS will drive high quality property renovation, creating town centre living space, re-purposing retail space that is too large for current need and demand and also creating space that can support community owned enterprises.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That Cabinet notes the successful delivery and outcomes of the Phase 2 Pride in Our High Street programme
- 2.2 That Cabinet approves proposals for Phase 3 of the Programme and delegates to the Director Housing, Employment & Infrastructure in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood, Commercial Services & Regeneration responsibility for Place Plan delivery and grant funding approvals

2. SUMMARY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

COMMUNITY IMPACT	Do these proposals contribute to specific Co-Operative Council priority objective(s)?	
	Yes	The programme will contribute directly to the following priorities: -Protect and create jobs as a business supporting and business winning Council

		<p>-Ensure that neighbourhoods are safe, clean and well-maintained</p> <p>-Regenerate those neighbourhoods in need</p>
	Will the proposals impact on specific groups of people?	
	No	By contributing to high street regeneration the programme has the potential to have a positive impact on a wide cross section of the community.
TARGET COMPLETION/DELIVERY DATE	Investment will be delivered over the next 2 years	
FINANCIAL/VALUE FOR MONEY IMPACT	Yes	<p>The capital programme includes £4.8m across 2021/22 and 2022/23 allocated to Pride in Our High Streets which together with some existing revenue resources will fund the initiatives identified in the report.</p> <p>Opportunities for sustaining investment through a 'revolving investment fund' mechanism should generate future ongoing investment but will need to be carefully managed and monitored.</p> <p>Finance will monitor spend and provide updates to Senior Management and Members as appropriate.</p> <p>PH – 2/6/21</p>
LEGAL ISSUES	Yes	<p>Any decision made by the Authority can be subject to challenge in respect of its reasonableness or lawfulness. Therefore a robust and transparent assessment procedure is required so as to avoid challenge of either the process followed or recommendations made by Officers and the Decision Makers.</p> <p>Whilst State Aid in its previous form is no longer in existence following the UK's departure from the EU a replacement regime entitled "Subsidy Control" has been implemented and will need to be considered when providing any support which may give a financial advantage. Legal advice will be provided as and when requested in this regard.</p> <p>Legal Services have developed a standard form of grant agreement that will be used in each award of funding</p>

		EH 3.6.21
OTHER IMPACTS, RISKS & OPPORTUNITIES	No	
IMPACT ON SPECIFIC WARDS	Yes	The programme will support regeneration across all our High Streets through promotional campaigns. The development of Place Plans will focus on the 6 borough town high streets with the greatest potential to benefit from investment.

PART B) – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

3. INFORMATION

Building on Success – Pride in Our High Streets 2018-2020

- 4.1 Phase 2 of PIOHS has seen £2.2m committed to a range of high street initiatives alongside significant investment being made by a number of Town Councils including Wellington, Oakengates and Dawley.

Business Grant Programme

- 4.2 The innovative PIOHS grant programme has attracted national interest for its scope and proactive approach to addressing levels of empty high street properties. **Since its launch 30 High Street businesses have been supported to open up taking on empty properties across all 6 of our Borough Towns, leveraging more than £1.32m of private sector investment and creating more than 100 new jobs with more projected as these businesses diversify and grow and in their local supply chain.** All the businesses have been **provided with pre-start up and ongoing business support by the Council’s business support team ensuring that these new businesses continue** to run successfully with several having operated for more than 2 years.
- 4.3 The PIOHS Retail Start up Grant which offers grants of up to £10,000 was extended in late 2020 to reflect the impact of Covid. The Revive and Thrive grant Programme now offers three separate grant funding including a focus on helping existing businesses diversify to meet new challenges.
- 4.4 **Retail Start Up Grants:** This grant has supported the opening of businesses across all 6 borough town high streets with more applications in the pipeline. The scheme has added to high street diversity increasing the food and drink offer and range of independent retailers without displacing existing business.



The Toy Box Ironbridge



Society Market Newport

- 4.5 **Diversification Grants:** This grant reflects the flexibility of the PIOHS programme which has adapted to changing circumstances and new challenges affecting high street businesses. **With our help businesses have taken on the challenge of on-line competition for example by commissioning websites and establishing on-line payment systems, setting up home delivery services or by taking specialist training courses to extend their customer offer.**



- 4.6 **Start Up Trial Grants:** It has been a feature of Covid that more people are considering self-employment and looking for opportunities in the high street. **The Start – Up Trial Grant provides a small grant to help a potential high street business to test its business idea in a market setting with a minimum of risk.** To date awards have been made to 10 businesses to enable them to take up stands in Wellington and Newport Markets.
- 4.7 Saturday Cycles in Wellington Market reflects the success of the trial grant scheme with the business already looking at an empty retail unit in Wellington to grow on and expand. **In the last couple of weeks the new Food Court at Wellington Market has opened where 8 new food businesses have**

been supported through PiOHS to create a new offer which is transforming Wellington Market and attracting new footfall to Wellington town centre.



Saturday Cycles



Wellington Market Food Court

- 4.8 Together, these grant schemes have delivered more than £390k of support to local businesses and high streets and created more than 100 new high street jobs, with more to be created as these businesses diversify and grow.

Property Façade Improvement Programme

- 4.9 Attractive, clean and safe high streets are recognised as underpinning the attraction of the High Street to visitors, residents and investors. **The PiOHS property façade improvement programme is transforming the look and feel of the high streets in Wellington, Oakengates, Ironbridge, Dawley and Madeley.**

- 4.10 Managed directly by the Council the scheme is focussed on properties in poor condition, bringing conservation areas back to life, reintroducing heritage colours and increasing the demand for retail space. **Some 50 properties have been transformed to date and following a temporary stop because of Covid the scheme has re-started with nearly 50 additional properties to be up-graded over 2021/22.**



The Square, Ironbridge



Firefly Oakengates

The High Street Re-Imagined – Young High Street Challenge

- 4.11 Young people are key to the survival of the high street; as both customers and future entrepreneurs. **The Council's engagement of young people in high street regeneration has been unique with hundreds of young people inspired to think about entrepreneurship as a future career.** It builds on the work the Council is doing through the Life Ready, Work Ready Programme.
- 4.12 The first Young High Street Challenge (YHSC) engaged with **almost 1,000 young people with some 200 students participating in the Challenge programme and finals.** The legacy of YHSC lies not just in inspiring young people but in tangible outputs:-

Retro Shack

- 4.13 Created by students from Wrekin College, winners of the first YHSC, **Retro Shack in Wellington which has continued to trade during covid demonstrates the power of young people to design and manage a successful high street enterprise.** Young people across Telford will now benefit from Retro Shack which will be offering an enterprise training opportunity during 2021/22 for students from across the borough.



Wellington Market Pop Up/Youth Market

- 4.14 The combined inspiration of pupils from Burton Borough and Haberdashers Adams School, the new Wellington Market Pop-Up/Youth Market will open this summer. Funded by PIOHS their ideas will see the **re-modelling of outdoor space at Wellington Market to create a vibrant and youthful area that will host a year round programme of markets and live music.** The space will complement the new Wellington Market Food Court, driving new footfall into Wellington High Street.



High Street MBA

- 4.15 The High Street MBA is a unique and inspiring learning experience for 15-18 year olds designing practical solutions to regenerate high streets which is being piloted in Telford in June 2021 before a national roll-out. Created in partnership with Wrekin College, PIOHS is sponsoring almost 100 young people, many from deprived communities, in a once in a lifetime opportunity. They will work with local and national businesses and learn key business skills from finance to marketing, developing these around a real high street business case.



- 4.16 Following delays due to Covid restrictions YHSC 2 will commence in autumn 2021 delivered in partnership with Wrekin College business school.

High Street Marketing and High Street Re-Opening

Promoting Our High Streets – Loyal to Local

- 4.17 Effective marketing and promotion is essential to attract footfall to our high streets. **The PIOHS Directory features more than 100 high street businesses and this has been complemented by marketing initiatives such as the celebration of High Street Heroes and most recently through the Loyal to Local campaign.** This campaign celebrates the best of our high street retailers and encourages local people to get involved by nominating the shops that they think offer the best service and contribute most to their communities.
- 4.18 **Summer 2021 will see the launch of a new MyTlc app which will be free to all high street businesses and will be a great marketing tool.** Through the app businesses across all our High Streets can design and customise their own page, create and promote offers quickly and easily knowing that they will be reaching their target audience. Businesses will receive all the collateral they need to promote the app which will be supported by an on-going marketing and promotion campaign to drive customer usage.



A Blueprint for High Street Regeneration – Pride In Our High Street Phase 3

Programme Objectives

- 4.19 Reflecting both the success of previous phases and new challenges and opportunities, PIOHS Phase 3 will continue to focus on an ambitious programme to create:
- **Diverse high streets** with something for everyone from shopping to work, catching up or celebrating
 - **A vibrant and mixed night time economy** which has been shown to help shape small towns
 - **High street businesses that are digitally aware** and have the skills and resources to compete against new challenges
 - **High streets that contribute to the net zero carbon agenda** and have attractive leisure offers and green spaces that are valued by the community
 - **Loyalty to ‘Local’** that extends beyond Covid
- 4.20 Each of our 6 borough town high streets is a separate destination with roles that vary from local community ‘hubs’ to larger centres attracting visitors from across the Borough and further afield via rail and bus links. Each has unique selling points, active Town Councils, committed businesses and local partnerships and a local vision for what the high street should offer and how it should look.

Place Plans

- 4.21 **To inform investment through the PIOHS programme, a Place Plan will be established for each Borough Town high street engaging with TC and local partners.** This will establish a tailored investment plan for each Borough Town. The development of the Plans will be informed by data such as the number of empty units, access to high speed broadband or landmark buildings in poor condition, quality of public realm and intelligence around

anti-social behaviour as well as opportunities to develop a stronger destination offer tailored to the local area. The plans will also link to other Council initiatives and investments including the Safer Stronger Communities and the Destination Programmes where these have a high street focus.

Continuing Successful Initiatives

4.22 Alongside the investment made linked with Place Plans, PIOHS Phase 3 will continue with successful initiatives running across our High Streets including:

- The **Revive and Thrive Grant Programme** with investment priorities kept under review to reflect changing need and demand post covid
- Completion of the existing **Property Façade Improvement programme** delivering a total of 100 premises transformed
- **Young High Street Challenge 2** will re-start in September replicating the success of the first Challenge
- **High street marketing and promotion under the banner Loyal to Local** will continue borough wide

Introducing New Initiatives

4.23 New initiatives which will be delivered across all Borough Towns tailored to support outcomes from Place Plans – including:-

- further grant/voucher schemes,
- create inspiring environments and leisure opportunities,
- encourage the 'green high street through eco-friendly initiatives,
- create welcoming and safe high streets and
- continue to engage young people in high street regeneration.

Grants and Voucher Schemes

4.24 If our high streets are to survive, businesses need to have the right digital skills and the ability to market and promote their offer to the right audience. **A new grant/voucher scheme will help high street businesses with the costs of purchasing equipment, designing a website and getting their branding and marketing right.** The scheme will be complemented by a digital business support package for retailers, delivered through the Council's Business Growth Hub.



- 4.25 Recognising the importance of attractive and clean high streets, a **Property Façade Voucher Scheme** will be introduced to continue and protect the legacy of the current Façade Programme. A grant/voucher scheme will be created to allow businesses to replace fascia signboards and re-paint property frontages, **informed by a guide to improvement to ensure that quality is maintained and planning regulations are followed.**
- 4.26 PIOHS will support the green high street and the growing trend for environmentally friendly packaging by **creating a small grant that will help businesses make the move to be eco –friendly.** As well as supporting a move to environmentally friendly packaging the grant will also support local recycling/up-cycling initiatives.
- 4.27 The PIOHS grant programme is designed to support businesses operating in our 6 borough town high streets. The survival of these high streets is essential to thriving local communities and they are important contributors to successful local economies. The Council also recognises the significant contribution and importance of businesses within the retail and services sectors including those who, although not in the High Street, are located in recognised Centres with strong community demand and importance. Exceptional applications to the programme will be considered from businesses operating in these local centres, where these offer a valuable local service, fill a gap in local retail provision or whose loss would be significant to the ward they operate in.

Welcoming and Safe High Streets

- 4.28 Welcoming and safe high streets are essential to their survival and particularly if our high streets are to support a thriving night-time economy. **Linked to the Council’s Stronger Safer Communities initiative we will aim for ‘Purple Flag’ status to promote the night-time economy of our high streets as a safe and clean environment for everyone – including Southwater and Telford Town Centre.**
- 4.29 National high street guidance stresses the importance of a welcoming and informing environment and we know that our high streets can capitalise on this by ensuring that our shops and businesses offer high standards of personal service and are well informed about their local town and high street. **Businesses will be encouraged to participate in locally delivered hospitality workshops and will also have access to an on-line learning and information platform.**

Inspiring Environments and Local Leisure

- 4.30 **Inspiring and green spaces, access to leisure activities and regular markets, events and festivals** all create active high streets that help attract and retain shoppers and visitors. Led by Place Plan research, PIOHS will transform local high streets by supporting a range of initiatives:

- Art installations, art trails, street furniture and green spaces are all important to attract residents and visitors alike. PIOHS will create new spaces but also build on some of the initiatives that have already started as part of Covid recovery
- PIOHS will sponsor a regular schedule of high street events and festivals from culture to food and youth markets so that these become embedded and sustainable
- The growth of loyalty to local high streets will be supported and encouraged through initiatives that will engage local people in high street regeneration such as poster design competitions



Sustaining Investment and Growth

- 4.31 Informed by data collected to create individual High Street Place Plans, **PIOHS will identify opportunities for the Council to acquire high street assets for renovation and then either sale or rent, the profits from which will form the basis of a ‘revolving investment fund’ for on-going high street investment.**
- 4.32 PIOHS will also establish a **viability gap fund to encourage private sector re-development of long empty retail premises.** This will incorporate a ‘pay-back’ mechanism to secure developer contributions to the revolving investment fund.
- 4.33 Through these mechanism PIOHS will drive high quality property renovation, creating town centre living space, re-purposing retail space that is too large for current need and demand and also creating space that can support community owned enterprises.

5 IMPACT ASSESSMENT – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

NONE

6 PREVIOUS MINUTES

Cabinet 18th October 2018 Pride in our High Streets
Cabinet 18th October 2017 Pride in Our High Streets
Cabinet 29th June 2017 Young High Street Challenge
Cabinet 17th November 2016 Pride in Our High Streets
Cabinet 28th January 2016 Pride in Our High Streets

7 BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

**Report prepared by Kathy Mulholland, Service Delivery Manager
Investment and Business Support, Telephone: 01952 567572**

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TELFORD & WREKIN COUNCIL

CABINET – 8 JULY 2021

CUSTOMER SERVICES & DIGITAL PEER CHALLENGE

REPORT OF DIRECTOR: COMMUNITIES, CUSTOMER AND COMMERCIAL SERVICES

LEAD CABINET MEMBER – CLLR RICHARD OVERTON, DEPUTY LEADER AND ENFORCEMENT, COMMUNITY SAFETY AND CUSTOMER SERVICES

PART A) – SUMMARY REPORT

1. SUMMARY OF MAIN PROPOSALS

- 1.1 This report summarises the feedback from a Customer Services and Digital Peer Challenge that was carried out by the Local Government Association (LGA) in May 2021.
- 1.2 Following the development of new Customer and Digital Strategies, and delivery of a range of key actions to improve the customer experience (summarised in Appendix 1), the Council invited the LGA to review our current approach and suggest how we could make further progress.
- 1.3 Overall feedback was very positive, with the peer challenge team recognising the Council's focus on good customer service and the commitment of members and staff at all levels to 'get things right for residents'. The team also praised the extensive range of ways we seek feedback from customers and the desire to engage and involve people, with the suggestion that we could go even further in co-designing services with customers, partners and staff.
- 1.4 The advantages of offering a wide range of channels, including maintaining more traditional channels for people that need them, were recognised, as was the progress we have made to improve digital access and connectivity, for example through the roll-out of superfast broadband and schemes such as Kindle Kindness and Laptops for Learners. However, the peer challenge team also highlighted feedback that the consistency of service across different channels varied, and recommended developing a longer-term channel strategy.
- 1.5 The peer challenge team also noted the Council's ambition and the range of actions underway, whilst stressing the importance of prioritising and regularly evaluating the effectiveness of these.
- 1.6 The peer challenge recommendations and proposed actions to respond to these are summarised in Section 5, and the full feedback is set out in Appendix 2.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That Cabinet notes the feedback and recommendations from the Local Government Association Customer Services and Digital Peer Challenge and approves the proposed actions to respond to these, as set out in Section 5 of this report.

3. SUMMARY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

COMMUNITY IMPACT	Do these proposals contribute to specific Co-Operative Council priority objective(s)?	
	Yes	A community-focussed, innovative council providing efficient, effective and quality services.
	Will the proposals impact on specific groups of people?	
	Yes	All customers of the Council.
TARGET COMPLETION/DELIVERY DATE	See action plan in Section 5.	
FINANCIAL/VALUE FOR MONEY IMPACT	Yes	The capital programme for 2021/22 includes £400k for Customer Services which will support the further development of the My Telford app which is already in progress. Proposed actions outlined below will need to be met from existing budgets and resources available to Customer Services. MLB – 28.06.2021
LEGAL ISSUES	No	There are no direct legal implications associated with this report. Where, required, legal advice will be provided in relation to the steps taken to implement the actions outlined in this report. ACL – 25 June 2021
OTHER IMPACTS, RISKS & OPPORTUNITIES	Yes	The peer challenge provides an opportunity for the Council to reflect on and further improve its Customer & Digital Services.
IMPACT ON SPECIFIC WARDS	No	Borough-wide impact.

PART B) – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 The Council recognises that Customer and Digital Services are an essential part of delivering our vision to 'Protect, Care and Invest to create a better borough'. In October 2020, we refreshed our Council Plan to include a focus on ensuring that our customer experience is the best possible.
- 4.2 This has driven the development of a new Customer Strategy and Contract (January 2021) and an updated Digital Strategy (June 2021), which set out our vision for Customer and Digital Services, and how we will deliver this.
- 4.3 These strategies build on work done over a number of years to improve the experience for our customers. In order to take stock of progress, we invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to carry out a Peer Challenge, to give an independent view of what we do well, but also how we could improve in the future.
- 4.4 Peer challenges are a recognised improvement tool, and are not formal inspections. They involve a small team of officers and councillors spending time at a council to provide challenge and share learning. The peer challenge team involved representatives from the London Borough of Brent, Sevenoaks District Council, Plymouth City Council and Sunderland City Council.
- 4.5 In advance of the peer challenge, we prepared a position statement for the team (Appendix 1), which summarises key performance and customer satisfaction data, progress to date and planned future actions.
- 4.6 Due to the challenges of meeting on site due to the Covid pandemic, the peer challenge team carried out a virtual review on 26 and 27 May 2021. This involved interviews and focus groups with Cabinet and ward members, members of the Senior Management Team, front-line staff, partner organisations, Town & Parish Councils and customers.

5. FEEDBACK, RECOMMENDATIONS & ACTION PLAN

- 5.1 The full feedback and recommendations from the peer challenge team are set out in Appendix 2.
- 5.2 Positive feedback from the peer challenge team included:
 - “The council is very ambitious and top-performing in key areas”;
 - “The people working for (the council) show tremendous commitment, enthusiasm and creativity. This applies at all levels of the organisation”;
 - “Elected members and staff are extremely passionate about striving to do both their best and the right thing for local people”;
 - “The focus is all about providing good customer service and enabling people to engage with the Council through whichever means best suit them”;

- “Staff feel empowered and welcome the clear leadership provided by the Leader, Chief Executive and their political and managerial colleagues”;
- “There is a very wide range of channels for people accessing services and customer services”;
- “The council has an extensive set of mechanisms through which it seeks to obtain citizen and customer perspectives and insights. This demonstrates a real desire to draw in learning and to involve and engage people”;
- “There are lots of actions and initiatives underway in the council in relation to customer service”;
- “There is a desire to drive the digital offer...enhancing connectivity, with superfast broadband provision already to 98.5% of the borough and free public Wi-Fi in a wide range of council and community buildings, is a crucial part of this. Another key aspect is focusing on people’s ability to access digital, as seen with the provision of free access to computers (with nearly 96,000 hours of usage in 2019/20) and the provision of free devices to help vulnerable adults and children during the pandemic under the ‘Kindle Kindness’ and ‘Laptops for Learners’ initiatives”.

5.3 The peer challenge team also made a number of recommendations of areas that we could consider or improve on. These are set out in the table below, along with our proposed actions.

Recommendation:	Proposed actions:
<p>Consider the issues of fragmentation, inconsistency and quality we have highlighted around customer service – recognising this is about enhancing things for citizens rather than anything around addressing fundamental problems.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As set out in our existing Customer Strategy, continue the planned migration of more services into the corporate contact centre in order to rationalise the number of published telephone numbers and further improve the consistency of the customer experience – the contact centre migration plan will be prioritised based on call volume and handling data; • Continue our customer insight programme, including capturing instant feedback from customers, to monitor the quality of the service provided and drive improvement; • In conjunction with the corporate contact centre team, review opportunities to resolve more enquiries at the first point of contact, with a particular focus on more complex services where a higher proportion of issues are currently passed on to case-workers; • Explore becoming a member of the Institute for Customer Service in order to benchmark our customer service against other organisations, and work towards Service Mark accreditation; • Launch the new MyTelford app (currently in testing) to improve the range of issues that can be reported and feedback to customers;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure web editors regularly check all web links to ensure these are functioning and up to date; • Review our approach to managing life events to consider how things could be made simpler for customers, for example following a bereavement.
<p>Continuing the streamlining of processes 'behind the scenes' in order to secure further customer service advantages and likely financial benefits through the continued digitalisation or automation of processes and systems from start to finish</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete the final phase of work to replace PDF forms on the Council's Website with online forms that link into back office systems where possible (we have been systematically replacing PDFs over a number of years, there are now only 16 PDFs remaining to convert, with a further 25 in progress); • Develop and implement a Customer Relationship Management roadmap to reduce the number of separate systems used by the contact centre team and further streamline online services for customers.
<p>Consider making it more straightforward for people to raise a complaint, including being able to do so anonymously, in a context of this being an organisation that is clearly keen to learn and deliver improvement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable people to report complaints anonymously online. <p>(We have considered the suggestion to widen our definition of complaints, however we feel that badging what we see as a service request as a complaint will not add value to the customer experience. This is because the target response time for complaints would typically be longer than if the issue was logged as a service request. We also feel that keeping our definition consistent enables us to better monitor trends over time).</p>
<p>Continue the work to enhance the citizen and community engagement elements that are not yet working to best effect, including responding to the desire on the part of staff and partners to be involved in the co-design of services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build on existing feedback mechanisms to mystery customers, such as the annual newsletter, by providing more immediate feedback after an assignment has been completed, for example through a 'we said, you did' thank you event; • Involve engagement forums, such as the new Community Panel and Making it Real Board more regularly in the planning of services and carry out more user testing to co-design new services, such as the new MyTelford app.
<p>Develop a greater sense of prioritisation and increased co-ordination around the customer service actions and initiatives that get taken forward in the future.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update the key actions in the Customer and Digital Strategies to not only reflect timescale for delivery, but also the relative priority of each action, ensuring that this also links through into relevant business plans.

<p>Establish greater rigour around evaluating the effectiveness of customer service actions and initiatives that have been launched.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build evaluation of key projects into Customer Relationship Board meetings and performance reviews with lead Cabinet member.
<p>Ensure intelligence is drawn out from data more in order to inform channel shift and the development of alternative or additional customer service approaches. Develop a 'channel roadmap' and sit the emerging digital strategy within this, enabling thinking and planning around future 'channel shift' to be considered fully 'in the round'.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and implement a channel road map, informed by current and likely future usage of different channels, in order to plan future channel shift and actions needed to support this (acknowledging that whilst there may be greater take-up of digital channels over time, maintaining a wide range of channels and ensuring no-one is left behind will remain a key part of our strategy).
<p>Develop a shared narrative around 'Everything Speaks' so that the overall concept and the principles and beliefs that sit at the heart of it are made easily understandable and can be clearly conveyed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with Corporate Communications to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop a simple and concise definition of 'Everything Speaks' and communicate this through internal channels and refreshed customer service training; - Create and apply new brand guidelines and review sub-brands in order to ensure branding of council services is clear and consistent.

6. PREVIOUS MINUTES

6.1 None.

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

7.1 None.

Report prepared by Fliss Mercer, Director: Communities, Customer and Commercial Services, Telephone: 01952 384300

Telford & Wrekin Council Customer & Digital Services Peer Review

Position Statement

Appendix 1

May 2021



'Protect, Care and Invest to create a better borough'

We would like to welcome the Peer Review Team to Telford & Wrekin Council

Customer and Digital Services are an essential part of delivering our commitment to **'Protect, Care and Invest to create a better borough'**. In October 2020, we refreshed our Council Plan and priorities, with a clear focus on ensuring that 'our customer experience is the best possible'. This has driven the development of a new Customer Strategy (January 2021) and an updated draft Digital Strategy.

OUR VISION IS TO: Work with our customers to develop quality services that are accessible to all and to make every contact count

We want the experience our customers have to be outstanding. We believe the best way to achieve this is through an 'Everything Speaks' culture where we deliver consistent standards of service Council-wide, pay attention to detail, continue get the basics right and live our co-operative values https://www.telford.gov.uk/info/20268/co-operative_council/779/our_vision_priorities_and_values

We also want to continually evolve and modernise our services. We are committed to ensuring that there is an online option for every service, and that this is so easy and reliable that it becomes customers preferred way to do business with us.

Our updated Digital Strategy extends beyond how we interact with customers, and provides a wider foundation for our ambitious plans for Telford & Wrekin. We want to embrace the opportunities that have opened up through the step change in the use of technology during the Covid pandemic, whilst improving digital access to ensure that no-one gets left behind.

OUR VISION IS TO: Create a better borough through digital innovation, providing seamless connectivity for all, encouraging more take-up of information and services online

This peer review is a timely opportunity to reflect on our progress to date, what we do well, but also how we can improve in future. Our position statement provides a starting point for this. As well as headline data on our contacts, performance and customer feedback, we have given an overview of our current approach and our plans to move forward on our journey to excellence covering four key areas:

- a. Embedding an 'Everything Speaks' culture and driving continuous improvement of our services
- b. Inviting, listening to and acting on feedback from customers
- c. Keeping customers informed
- d. Creating a better borough through digital innovation, connectivity for all and encouraging take-up of services and information online

We look forward to your challenge, ideas and suggestions.



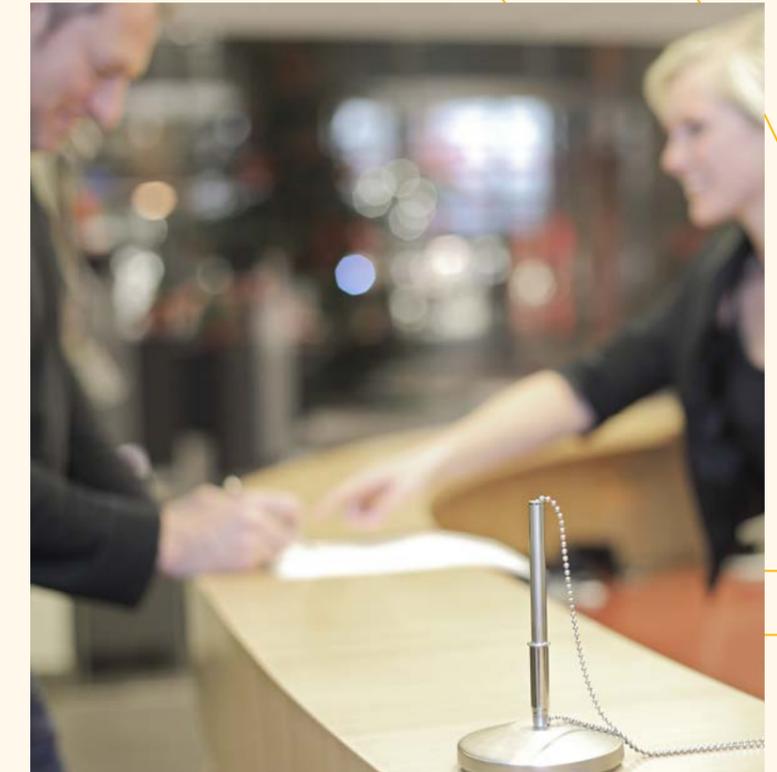
Councillor Shaun Davies – Council Leader



Councillor Richard Overton – Deputy Leader Member for Community Safety, Enforcement and Customer Services



David Sidaway – Chief Executive



Listening to our customers

YOU SAID...

That the Soft Play vending machine options were unhealthy and there was no water available in the Soft Play when Café Go was closed.

WE DID...

The vending machines are now stocked with fresh healthy options such as fruit bags and low sugar drinks and bottled water is also now available.

www.telford.gov.uk/yourviewsmatter



Our Leadership Team



Councillor Shaun Davies – Council Leader



Councillor Richard Overton – Deputy Leader Member for Community Safety, Enforcement and Customer Services



David Sidaway – Chief Executive



Angie Astley – Executive Director: Housing, Communities and Customer Services



Fliss Mercer – Director: Communities, Customer and Commercial Services



Jan Jennings – Assistant Director: Communications & External Affairs



Lee Higgins – Customer Relationships & Welfare Services Service Delivery Manager

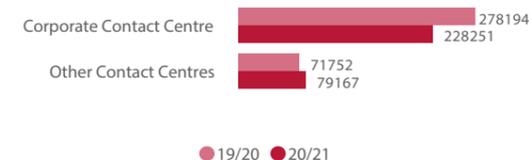


Kirsty King – ICT Service Delivery Manager

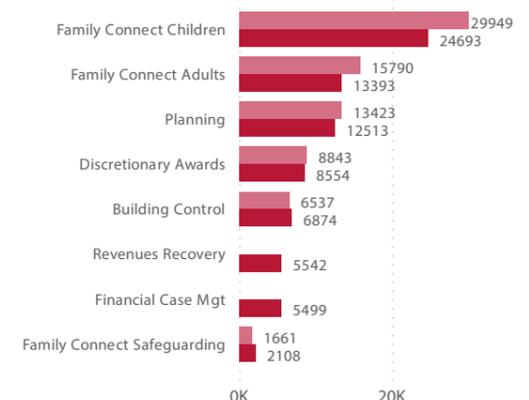
Customer Relationship Operational Board – Managers from each Directorate

Our Customer Contacts

Call volumes



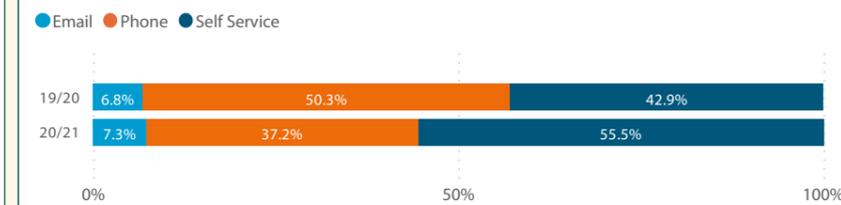
Breakdown of other contact centres



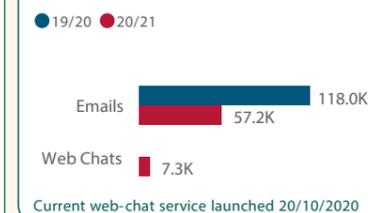
About this data

Financial Case Mgt and Revenues Recovery weren't established in 19/20, the Financial Case Mgt calls came under Discretionary Awards. Complaints and positive feedback data for 20/21 is to the 28th February 2021.

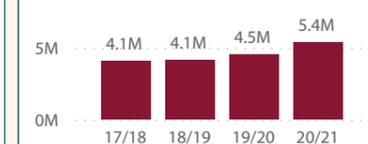
Percentage of contacts by channel



Email and web chat volumes



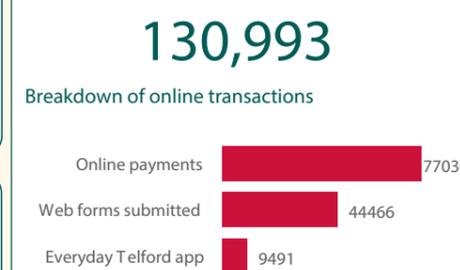
Website visits



Digital communications



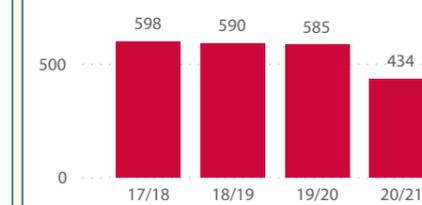
Online transactions



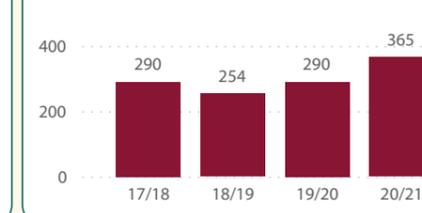
130,993

Breakdown of online transactions

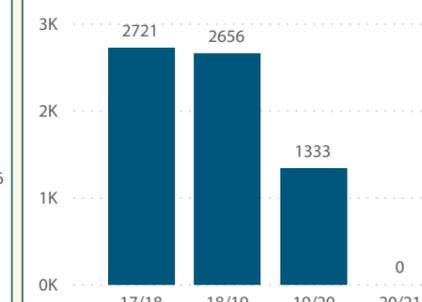
Stage 1 complaints



Positive feedback



Visitors to Southwater (Town Centre First Point)



Our Journey to Excellence - Embedding an 'Everything Speaks' Culture and Driving Continuous Improvement of Services

We have:

- Developed a new Customer Strategy & Contract with the involvement of the Senior Management Team (SMT), Leadership Forum, Employee Panel, Cabinet and customers – see [Our Customer Strategy - Customer Contract and Customer Strategy - Telford & Wrekin Council](#)
- Well established contact centres to improve the customer experience, including the main Corporate Contact Centre (CCC - 16 services), Family Connect (multi-agency Children's and Adult Services hub) and Planning/Building Control
- Extended services and opening hours in the CCC to respond to Covid and flooding, including a community support and rapid testing helpline and outbound calling to 1 in 5 households
- Offered face to face information and advice through First Points at various locations, including a Business & Planning First Point N.B. through successful channel shift and use of technology such as scan stations, First Point appointments had already reduced by 95% pre-Covid
- Redesigned and refurbished reception areas
- Put in place a new performance management framework including:
 - Monthly managing the business dashboard to SMT and Cabinet, including customer service and digital Key Performance Indicators (KPIs);
- More detailed monthly performance reports on the CCC to the lead Cabinet member and Executive Director/Director;
- Quarterly reports to Directors on complaints/positive feedback;
- Annual customer insight report to SMT, Cabinet and Audit Committee (published on the Council's Website).
- Increased evidence-based decision making, supported by extensive use of Power BI to present business intelligence in an interactive format (see Neighbourhood Services case study)
- Delivered a range of customer services training through our online learning platform
- Produced customer service guidance for staff with a one page service specific summary for staff without email
- Raised staff awareness through:
 - Sharing and recognising positive feedback and Chief Executive commendations
 - Discussions at Leadership Forum and Directorate management teams
 - Staff emails from the Chief Executive & Intranet

a

Intelligence-led Service Delivery – Neighbourhood Services

We have used Power BI to analyse data on bin condition to deliver more efficient routing, bin emptying and replacement schedules [details here.](#)

We are also using Power BI to better target enforcement patrols and priorities for our Community Action Teams (CATs), moving from a reactive to more proactive service targeting known hotspots.



CASE STUDY

Debt Advice Outreach – Revenues

We have successfully run outreach surgeries with the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) and our enforcement agents to provide advice to customers to address outstanding debts. To date, we have targeted two areas (Brookside and Donnington), resulting in people who have never previously engaged with us seeking help, putting in place repayment plans and accessing benefits.



CASE STUDY

Moving forward – we plan to:

- Report on progress in delivering the Customer Strategy annually
- Migrate more services' enquiries into the CCC, promoting digital first where possible and roll out contact centre technology such as intelligent voice recognition to other contact centres
- Review future First Point strategy post Covid – shift towards targeted outreach as part of our place-shaping programme (see Debt Advice Outreach case study)
- Put in place arrangements with key partners to take enquiries on each other's behalf
- Develop a new branding, signage and style guide
- Further develop the 'managing the business' dashboard to cover more services and channels and publish performance headlines online
- Provide Directors with a sample of customer journeys and re-introduce back to the floor days
- Review and roll out new customer service training to all frontline staff
- Include a customer service category in the new staff awards (October 2021)



New Customer Contract with updated service standards



Advice for customers at our First Points

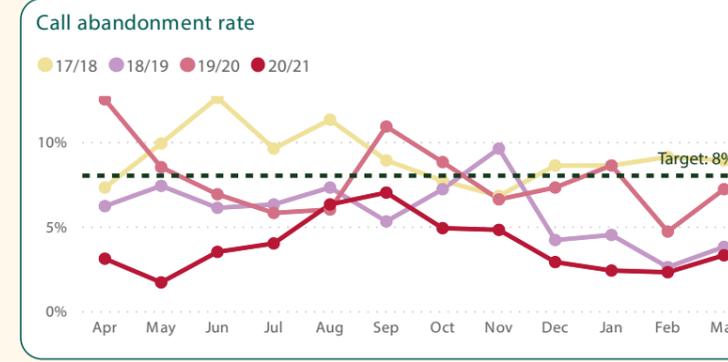
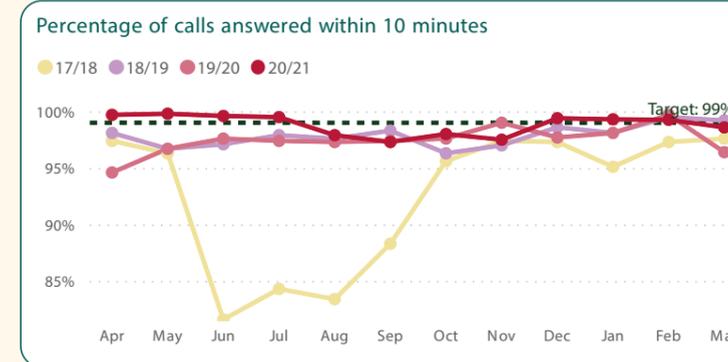


Aaron and Steve received a Chief Executive's commendation for their customer service

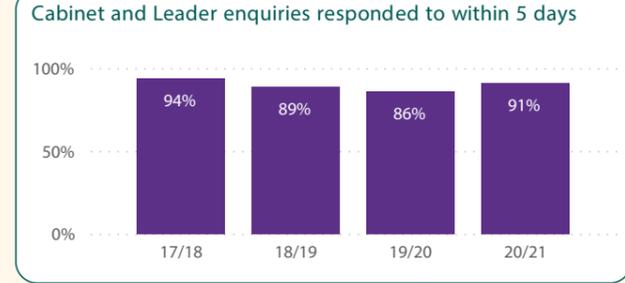
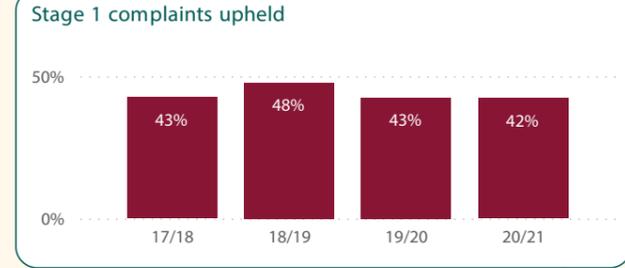
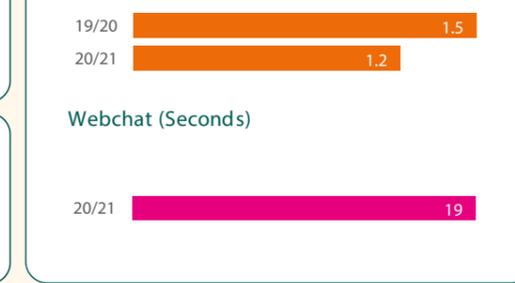


Our Children's Services are rated as Outstanding by Ofsted

Our Performance



About this data
 This data refers to the main contact centre only. We also monitor the performance of other contact centres e.g. Family Connect, Planning etc.
 Complaints and Cabinet and Leader data for 2020/21 is to the 28th February.



Our Journey to Excellence - Inviting, listening to and acting on feedback from customers

We have:

- Carried out a Residents Survey (Summer 2020) with 5,437 responses¹ - see [Cabinet Report Template](#) - Feb 2013 (telford.gov.uk) for examples of how we're acting on what people told us
- Consulted customers, employees, and other stakeholders on the draft Customer Strategy and Contract (October 2020)¹ - see [Cabinet Report Template](#) - Feb 2013 (telford.gov.uk)
- Recruited 124 volunteer mystery customers to give us another perspective on our customer experience.
- Completed 36 customer insight reviews, a mix of in-depth reviews, snapshot reviews (first impression assessments of visiting key Council buildings) and web-page reviews¹
- Started to capture more instant feedback from customers, using tools such as automated feedback at the end of every call to the Corporate Contact Centre, QR codes and the Net Promoter Score (see case study)¹
- Invited 2,466 people to join a new Community Panel
- Monitored and published complaints and positive feedback received from customers, including lessons learned (see [Complaints and compliments annual reports](#) - Telford & Wrekin Council)
- Engaged with a range of local groups about our services, including the Young People's Forum, the Interfaith Council, Carers Forum and Making it Real Board (see case study)
- Asked customers to act as user testers to help develop new services, for example the new chat-bot and the virtual house
- Introduced an 'Everything Speaks' system for Cabinet members to report issues of concern to SMT for action
- Set up regular meetings with town and parish councils to seek their feedback on Council Services

* 1 – Headline results are summarised in the 'Customer Feedback' section.



b

Net Promoter Score – Leisure

As a commercial service, Leisure use the Net Promoter Score (NPS), a customer experience measure used worldwide. A sample of customers are contacted after visiting our Centres and asked how likely they are to recommend the service to a friend on a scale of 0-10. The NPS is calculated by subtracting the % of people scoring 0-6 from the % of people scoring 9-10, and provides an internal benchmark and comparison with industry norms. 60% of Leisure Services customers scored the service 9 or 10, giving a net promoter score of 48, well above the industry average of 31. Using the NPS enables any customer concerns to be promptly responded to, for example reallocating cleaning resource to address a clear trend in NPS feedback about the cleanliness of one of the Leisure Centre's changing facilities.



Making it Real Board – Adult Social Care

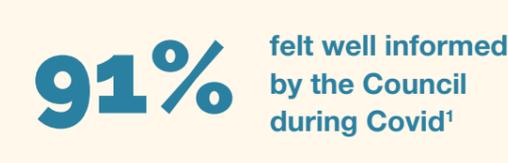
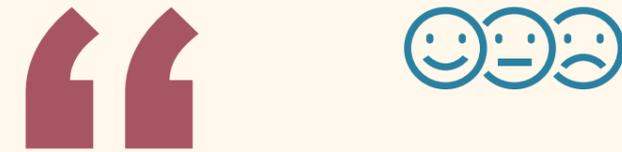
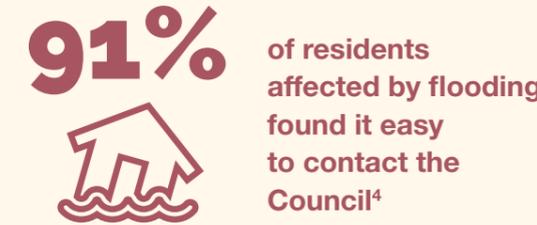
The Making it Real Board is made up of 7 people who use Adult Services. As 'experts by experience' the board informs, questions and challenges our developments and practice to co-produce services. Hear from members of the Making it Real Board <https://youtu.be/qbTQG0hx46Y>



Moving forward – we plan to:

- Deliver a Council-wide engagement plan for 2021/22 – prioritising:
 - Engagement in areas of the Borough where the percentage of people who feel able to influence decisions is relatively low;
 - Increase user testing before launching new services,
 - Capture feedback from visitors to the Borough to support recovery of the visitor economy.
- Launch the new Community Panel – a flexible approach and a wider range of ways to get involved
- Modernise engagement with customers through a new mobile platform
- Carry out additional targeted recruitment of both Community Panel members and mystery customer volunteers to ensure these are as representative of the community as possible
- Continue our programme of customer insight reviews
- Expand the use of service improvement tools to increase employee involvement.
- Update the current Parish Charter with a new Parish Partnership Agreement in consultation with Town and Parish Councils

Customer Feedback



“There has been impressive delivery by the council (during Covid), both independently and with and through others, and it is making a difference”
LGA Response and Recovery Peer Review

On a scale of 1-10, 90% of mystery customers scored the customer service they received 8 or higher³



“I was expecting modern and clean facilities and these were delivered”
Mystery Customer (snapshot review)



Outstanding

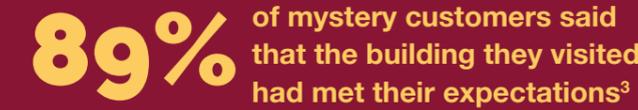


Our Children's and Shared Lives Services are both rated as Outstanding

Customer Feedback



On a scale of 1-10, 88% mystery customers scored the accessibility of the Council buildings they visited 8 or higher³

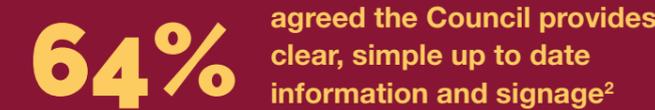


“Lovely warm welcome and a smile with a bright ‘sorry for your wait’ but I wasn’t waiting at all” Mystery Customer (snapshot review)



Mystery customers scored the Council Website home-page 90% for ease of navigation³

“You have gone above and beyond what I expected and been exceptional. I thought I would have to wait in a long queue” Compliment received about the Customer Contact Centre's web-chat service



1 – Residents Survey (July 2020)
2 – Customer Survey (October 2020)
3 – Customer insight reviews (various dates & services)

4 – Flood response survey (February 2021)
5 – Trip Advisor Reviews (March 2021) – 7 services/facilities with reviews

Our Journey to Excellence - Keeping customers informed

We have:

- Grown a strong following on social media - 33k on Facebook - 23k on Twitter
- Built our digital communications audience through regular e-news updates to 80k subscribers (36-39% open rate)
- Introduced a weekly e-newsletter from the Council Leader and regular Facebook live sessions with the Leader.
- Started a 'You Said, We did...' communications campaign to let customers know how we're using their feedback to improve services
- Delivered targeted communication campaigns to increase take-up of services (see 'As Featured by Martin Lewis' case study)
- Invested in additional film making, animation, design, digital marketing and social media skills, to take the digital first approach to communications
- Redesigned the Council's Website home-page
- Completed reviews of the majority of web-pages in line with new accessibility requirements and created a new web-page with accessibility information for all our facilities
- Developed [Live Well Telford](#) - an online community directory providing information and advice for all ages with more than 1,500 listings
- Written to every household in the Borough three times during the Covid pandemic about the services and support available
- Targeted our communications to increase take-up of public health services during the pandemic (see Community Champions case study)
- Sent a personal welcome letter from the Council Leader to everyone moving into the Borough.
- Distributed Your Voice publication to every household three times a year, using a mix of hard copy and digital.

Page 52



Using digital channels to build our audience



Our online community directory



As Featured by Martin Lewis – Communications

CASE STUDY

Our campaigns have had significant impact and reach, including Martin Lewis featuring our Council Tax holiday campaign in his Money Saving Expert blog, which led to 10,500 customers applying. Marcus Rashford also re-tweeted our Free School Meals take-up campaign which has seen claimants increase by 28% in the last year.



Martin Lewis praised our Council Tax holiday campaign -

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Community Champions – Community Services

CASE STUDY

In partnership with community groups, we have produced a series of videos in different languages, including British Sign Language, to promote take-up of Covid support, testing and vaccinations (watch at [I want to access updates in other languages](#) - Telford & Wrekin Council). This work has been recognised as national best practice by MHCLG and led to us securing grant funding to recruit Community Champion volunteers, who will promote public health services to their communities.



Moving forward – we plan to:

- Publish more information about how we're doing on the Council's website
- Start a new digital take-up campaign
- Review opportunities to consolidate our websites and complete accessibility reviews
- Review our platform and content management solution for our main website
- Send out a ward newsletter (1 ward per week on a rolling programme) to highlight services and developments at a local level.
- Develop a Telford and Wrekin TV channel to engage with local residents
- Establish a studio base in Telford Town Centre for film making

Creating a Better Borough through Digital Innovation, Connectivity for All and Encouraging Take-up of Services and Information Online

We have:

- Updated our Digital Strategy covering customers, communities, workforce and place

Digital Customer:

- Over 100 services available online with rapid development of new online services during the pandemic, everything from housing advice to music lessons (see WhatsApp for Families and Job Box case studies)
- Used Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software to personalise and connect online services into back office systems (see Personal Touch case study)

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Created a my Telford account for customers to view and track their requests and get local information based on their address – 36% of adults in the Borough now have an account

- Developed a new my Telford test app for mobile devices featuring the most used online services
- Adopted contact centre technology such as Intelligent Voice Recognition (IVR) to improve performance
- Introduced web-chat on the home-page of the Council's Website and a new web-bot that automatically answers >600 frequently asked questions
- Introduce text message appointment reminders

Digital Communities:

- Trialled a new app to help adults with learning disabilities to live independently and prepare for work as part of a LGA Digital Innovation Pilot

- Opened a new Independent Living Centre where customers can try assistive technology before they buy or visit our Virtual House (see case study)
- Provided free devices to help vulnerable adults and children during the Covid pandemic (see Laptops for Learners & Kindle Kindness case study)
- Enabled free access to PCs (95,892 hours of usage in 2019/20), run Telford Online ICT drop-in sessions and targeted ICT support for job-seekers at libraries
- Gone virtual with a range of community events and live-streamed activities from Council Meetings to fitness classes (see virtual VE day case study)
- Provided free public WiFi in a wide range of Council and community buildings

Digital Place:

- Engaged 150 businesses in Tech Telford, promoting knowledge sharing across digital and tech businesses
- Rolled out superfast broadband coverage to 98.5% of the Borough, exceeding national targets
- Developed an online business directory to support High Street recovery

Digital Workforce:

- Enabled effective and collaborative remote working through the roll out of Office 365, laptops, Microsoft Teams, soft-phones and other devices to support mobile working (see Enforcement on the Go case study)
- Held multi-disciplinary virtual meetings across health and care

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WhatsApp for Families – Children's Services

Family meetings are now being delivered virtually, including via WhatsApp, which has helped keep children and families connected. Our successes include A & A, 2 young children taken into care at the start of the first lockdown. Their foster carer put on different virtual activities that A & A's parents were able to join in with online, and with some gentle encouragement and guidance, the family's confidence grew leading to a smooth transition when face to face contact visits restarted in the summer.

CASE STUDY



Personal Touch – Benefits

We have developed an online form for housing benefit checks which enables customers to easily upload photos/scanned documents, sent as a link via a personalised email and text message. The form automatically indexes into our document management system. Completed forms have been returned within 20 minutes of being issued with 25% of forms back within 3 days - which is roughly the time it would take customers to receive a posted form, which used to take 7-8 days to be returned.

CASE STUDY



Job Box – Employment & Skills

Our employment support programme, Job Box, moved its services to an online offer with a refreshed website www.telfordjobbox.co.uk Customers can now book their own appointments online and access self-help videos on topics such as CV writing and preparing for interview. This new approach has helped 1,452 residents, with a 46% increase in Website users.

CASE STUDY



Moving Job Box online

Virtual House – biT (Property Team) and Adult Social Care

CASE STUDY

Take a tour of the virtual house at <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=qHk7tNdXbcB> developed by our in-house Property Team and Adult Social Care. Customers are able to see room by room how >100 items of assistive technology could benefit them to live more independently.



Showcasing assistive technology in our virtual house



Public access PCs in our libraries

Laptops for Learning & Kindle Kindness – Education, Libraries and Adult Social Care

CASE STUDY

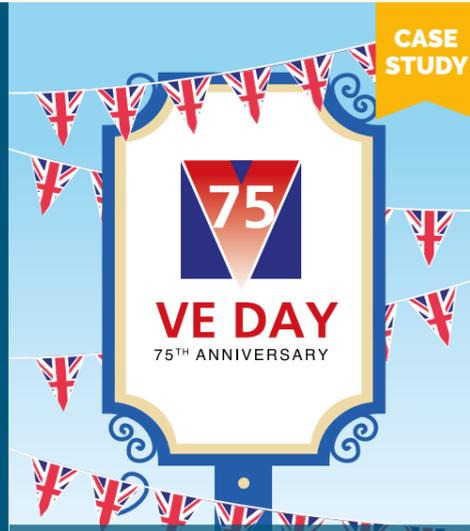
To help children without a device at home to take part in online learning during lockdown, we provided 726 devices to children across the Borough through our Laptops for Learning campaign. We also gave out 260 kindles to care homes, the Women and Children’s Unit and young carers. The Kindle Kindness campaign helped reduce isolation by keeping people in touch and giving access to our online library resources. We were overwhelmed by the public support for these campaigns – in total, we received donations of £38k and 231 devices (which were traded in or refurbished). Our My Options service has also provided adults with learning disabilities with iPads, enabling them to take part in virtual activities and stepping into work sessions.



Virtual VE day – Events and Communications Teams

CASE STUDY

We were determined to mark the 75th anniversary of the end of WW2 in Europe, putting on an ambitious schedule to bring our community together virtually, ranging from a flight for heroes by pilot Bob to virtual singalongs with schools and care homes. This event had a reach of 1.5 million with 450k impressions. Enjoy one of our 2020 highlights at www.youtube.com/watch?v=YjbXPs13srA



The start of a year of virtual events

Moving forward – we plan to:

- Make more services and enquiry types available online, based on a gap analysis carried out
- Launch 2 new apps - my Telford Loyalty Card (TLC) app which will give customers access to information and offers on their local High Street and a my Leisure app (these will form a complimentary suite of apps along with the my Telford app, which will also be developed further)
- Consider whether some customer types should be moved to online only access
- Review and bring together an enhanced Telford Online digital upskilling offer and extend to outreach locations
- Pilot new options for customers without devices or access to the Internet e.g. virtual hubs and devices on prescription
- Move to an integrated health & social care record to enable professionals to access information to deliver safe and seamless care
- Implement GovRoam which enables staff to access networks at partner buildings
- Set up a ‘Digital First’ staff group to champion digital transformation
- Create a supply chain app to build business partnerships
- Build a new Skills and Enterprise Hub focusing on maths and digital skills as part of the Council-led Station Quarter development in Telford Town Centre
- Deploy new ‘smart street’ technology, such as smart street lighting, bin sensors and real-time transport information displays
- Progress delivery of full fibre capable of supporting 5g (Telford & Wrekin has been announced as one of the early areas expected to benefit from the UK Gigabit programme)

Enforcement on the Go – Public Protection

CASE STUDY

We have equipped our Neighbourhood Enforcement Officers with new mobile devices which enable them to log and issue fixed penalty notices (FPNs) whilst out and about. Once the FPN is created, automatic payment reminders are sent by email at the appropriate time.





Last updated May 2021

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Appendix 2 - Customer Services and Digital Peer Challenge **Telford and Wrekin Council**

26th and 27th May 2021

Feedback Letter

1. Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and lockdown began in March 2020, the Local Government Association suspended the physical delivery of all peer challenge work delivered face to face.

To continue to support councils during this unprecedented period, the LGA rapidly refocused their support and adopted a new remote approach. In this context, the peer challenge considering customer services and digital commissioned was delivered virtually. It ran over the two days of 26th and 27th May 2021 and focused on the council's customer and digital services strategies. The peer team comprised the following individuals:

- Councillor Shama Tatler (Labour), Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Property and Planning, London Borough of Brent
- Councillor Peter Fleming (Conservative), Leader of Sevenoaks District Council and Chair of the Local Government Association's Improvement and Innovation Board
- Andy Ralphs, Strategic Director of Customer and Corporate Services, Plymouth City Council
- Liz St Louis, Assistant Director (Smart Cities), Sunderland City Council
- Chris Bowron, Peer Challenge Manager, LGA

2. Executive Summary

Telford and Wrekin is clearly a very ambitious council and one that is top-performing in key areas. Getting things right for citizens is well established as a fundamental principle of the organisation and the Co-operative Council values – openness and honesty; ownership; fairness and respect; and involvement – are clearly integral to this. Elected members and staff are extremely passionate about striving to do both their best and the right thing for local people.

The council has lots of good people working for it – they show tremendous commitment, enthusiasm and creativity. This applies at all levels of the organisation. Staff feel empowered and welcome the clear leadership provided by the Leader, Chief Executive and their political and managerial colleagues.

There is a very wide range of channels for people accessing services and customer services. This offers advantages, with traditional avenues being maintained, but there is fragmentation. There are also some issues of inconsistency and quality around customer service, for example a

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limited amount of 'depth' to the customer contact centre service. Continuing the streamlining of processes 'behind the scenes' is also crucial to securing further customer service advantages, with financial benefits likely also to accrue from this. Central to this is ensuring the continued digitalisation or automation of processes and systems from start to finish.

There is potentially something the council wants to consider in relation to making it more straightforward for people to raise a complaint, in a context of this being an organisation that is clearly keen to learn and deliver improvement.

The council has an extensive set of mechanisms through which it seeks to obtain citizen and customer perspectives and insights. This demonstrates a real desire to draw in learning and to involve and engage people. Not all the engagement elements are yet working to best effect, which the council recognises and is taking forward. There is a strong desire on the part of the staff, partners and individuals we met to build on the gleaning of insights and engagement activity by involving them further in the actual co-design of services.

There are lots of actions and initiatives underway in the council in relation to customer service. These emerge from a range of sources. Clearly not everything can be delivered and therefore developing a greater sense of prioritisation and increased co-ordination around what gets taken forward would be beneficial. People also highlighted the need for the council to establish greater rigour around evaluating the effectiveness of actions and initiatives it has launched. It is also important for the authority to be clearer as to why it is seeking to do something different ahead of developing actions and initiatives in the future. There feels to be benefits to be gained by ensuring intelligence is drawn out more from data in order to inform channel shift and the development of alternative or additional approaches.

The council has a desire to drive the digital offer whilst maintaining 'traditional' customer service approaches. Enhancing connectivity is a crucial part of this, as is focusing on people's ability to access digital. The council also recognises the importance of supporting people through 'up-skilling'. Cautionary notes are being sounded by partners around the drive for digital, with emphasis placed upon avoiding excluding people from accessing services. Our sense is that the council recognises all of these potential risks and is seeking to mitigate them through the approaches it has adopted.

The council is seeking to establish an 'Everything Speaks' culture which entails delivering consistent standards of service across the organisation, paying attention to detail, continuing to get the basics right and living the Co-operative Values. This 'culture piece' will inevitably take time, with that journey still being at a relatively early stage. The key elements the council already has in place are really solid building blocks. 'Everything Speaks' requires a shared narrative so that the overall concept and the principles and beliefs that sit at the heart of it are made easily understandable and can be clearly conveyed.

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We would encourage the council to develop a 'channel roadmap' and to sit the emerging digital strategy within this. What we are suggesting is a broader piece of work than the digital strategy, enabling thinking and planning around future 'channel shift' to be considered fully 'in the round'.

We also pose a question regarding whether the variety of visions, straplines and brands that exist across the council risks causing confusion and if there is a need to establish greater clarity in relation to the authority's branding?

3. Recommendations

- Consider the issues of fragmentation, inconsistency and quality we have highlighted around customer service – recognising this is about enhancing things for citizens rather than anything around addressing fundamental problems
- Continuing the streamlining of processes 'behind the scenes' in order to secure further customer service advantages and likely financial benefits through the continued digitalisation or automation of processes and systems from start to finish
- Consider making it more straightforward for people to raise a complaint, including being able to do so anonymously, in a context of this being an organisation that is clearly keen to learn and deliver improvement
- Continue the work to enhance the citizen and community engagement elements that are not yet working to best effect, including responding to the desire on the part of staff and partners to be involved in the co-design of services
- Develop a greater sense of prioritisation and increased co-ordination around the customer service actions and initiatives that get taken forward in the future
- Establish greater rigour around evaluating the effectiveness of customer service actions and initiatives that have been launched
- Ensure intelligence is drawn out from data more in order to inform channel shift and the development of alternative or additional customer service approaches
- Develop a shared narrative around 'Everything Speaks' so that the overall concept and the principles and beliefs that sit at the heart of it are made easily understandable and can be clearly conveyed

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- Develop a 'channel roadmap' and sit the emerging digital strategy within this, enabling thinking and planning around future 'channel shift' to be considered fully 'in the round'

4. Feedback on the core themes of the peer challenge

Telford and Wrekin is clearly a very ambitious council and one that is top-performing in key areas, including being classed as 'Outstanding' in relation to both adults (Shared Lives) and children's services. It is striving to progress further in relation both to serving local people and the place-shaping agenda and this drive for continuous improvement is reflected in the commissioning of both this peer challenge and a corporate peer challenge in the first half of June.

Getting things right for citizens is well established as a fundamental principle of the organisation and the Co-operative Council values – openness and honesty; ownership; fairness and respect; and involvement – are clearly integral to this.

The council has lots of good people working for it – they show tremendous commitment, enthusiasm and creativity. This applies at all levels of the organisation. Staff feel empowered and welcome the clear leadership provided by the Leader, Chief Executive and their political and managerial colleagues. An example of this is the written communication from the Leader to every household in the borough during the first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic providing people with key information and emphasising the way the council was there to support citizens and communities. Another example is the statement from the Chief Executive to staff, at the outset of the pandemic, of "if it feels right, just do it".

Elected members and staff are extremely passionate about striving to do both their best and the right thing for local people. The focus in the areas we were asked to look at it is very clearly on getting it right for local residents – it is all about providing good customer service and enabling people to engage with the council through whichever means best suit them. Potential financial savings that might be achieved through work in this area are not a primary driver – they would be seen very much as a by-product.

There is a very wide range of channels for people accessing services and customer services, including e-mail, the customer contact centres, an on-line chat facility, a web-bot and letters. This offers advantages, with traditional avenues being maintained, but there is fragmentation. An example is the relatively large number of telephone lines in existence across the council. Another is the different customer contact centres, with these being a corporate facility that includes a Revenues and Benefits function; 'Family Connect' as a multi-agency children's and adults' services hub; and the facility dedicated to Planning and Building Control. The breadth of

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IT infrastructure underpinning the customer experience exacerbates this sense of fragmentation with, for example, staff in the corporate contact centre working with 13 different systems.

Based on conversations we have had, there are also some issues of inconsistency and quality around customer service. As one example, some of the telephone numbers and electronic links to services promoted on the website are not functioning. As another example, the 'My Telford' App has limited functionality, focusing essentially on environmental and street scene matters rather than anything more broadly. We also learned that the reporting facility on the App currently doesn't always seem to offer a feedback loop. This leads to, as an example, a situation in which an elected member reporting a fly-tip needs to return to the spot in order to ascertain whether or not it has been dealt with. Thus there would clearly be benefits to be gained from better informing people of how issues they have reported have been addressed. We recognise that the council is already working on a revised version of the App to broaden out what it can deliver.

Continuing the streamlining of processes 'behind the scenes' is also crucial to securing further real customer service advantages, with financial benefits likely also to accrue from this. Central to this is ensuring the continued digitalisation or automation of processes and systems from start to finish. The council has already recognised this issue, reflected in its desire for "a bonfire of PDFs" which would see a move away from documents being made available digitally but still needing to be printed off by customers for completion and submission. This will build on the work already undertaken in areas such as housing benefits and for people requesting a household recycling centre permit, where automated processes have been introduced that work more effectively and efficiently for all involved.

People also spoke to us about a limited amount of 'depth' to the customer contact centre service. This sees a situation in which commitments are made to people phoning the contact centre that staff within specific services, possessing the more detailed knowledge required, will call them back but real inconsistency in the extent to which this happens. We would also encourage the council to look at how people experience the organisation when seeking to manage 'life events', such as dealing with the aftermath of a family bereavement, and the extent to which this is made as straightforward as possible for them.

We noted that the council receives a relatively low level of complaints. A key consideration here will be the definition that is applied to a complaint. For some councils, a 'service request', such as a missed bin, will be classified as a complaint whilst a different definition will be applied in other authorities. We also gleaned that it isn't possible to make a complaint to the council anonymously when using the online service, which may put some people off either because of them not wishing to be identified or the additional time taken to supply the necessary information. There is potentially something the council wants to consider within all of this which is the principle

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of making it more straightforward for people to raise a complaint – in a context of this being an organisation that is clearly keen to learn and deliver improvement.

The council has an extensive set of mechanisms through which it seeks to obtain citizen and customer perspectives and insights. This includes the Residents' Survey; Community Panel; mystery shoppers; the 'Making It Real Board' of 'experts through experience' amongst adults' services users; and instant feedback mechanisms such as QR codes. This demonstrates a real desire to draw in learning and also to involve and engage people. We learned, however, that not all the engagement elements are yet working to best effect, with a number of mystery shoppers we met feeling under-utilised or members of the Community Panel not receiving feedback on what actions the council had undertaken in response to their input. Work is already underway on the part of the council to develop the Community Panel further, including ensuring it is more fully representative of the community and that it is more meaningfully utilised. There is a strong desire on the part of the staff, partners and individuals we met to build on the securing of insights and engagement activity by involving them further in the actual co-design of services.

There are lots of actions and initiatives underway in the council in relation to customer service. These emerge from a range of sources, including the mechanisms outlined above; the ambitions and ideas of elected members; the enthusiasm and creativity of staff; and legislative frameworks. Clearly not everything can be delivered and therefore developing a greater sense of prioritisation and increased co-ordination around what gets taken forward would be beneficial. Differentiating between the essential and the 'nice to haves' will be important here and that will also aid resource allocation. With regard to the resourcing side of things, this goes beyond the allocation of available funding and into the support infrastructure, such as ensuring the capacity within IT to take forward technology-based projects.

People we spoke to highlighted the need for the council to establish greater rigour around evaluating the effectiveness of actions and initiatives it has launched. It is also important for the authority to be clearer as to why it is seeking to do something different ahead of developing actions and initiatives in the future. The authority has established a wide range of data to provide insights to customer service including key performance indicators; measures of usage around different channels; complaints and positive feedback; the customer survey undertaken in October last year; and the annual customer insight report. However, there feels to be greater benefit to be gained by ensuring the intelligence is drawn out from this, and other data sources, in order to inform channel shift and the development of alternative or additional approaches. The council has analytical capacity in relation to customers but this sits in different places within the organisation. There would seem to be an opportunity to better join things up better here, although that doesn't need to be read as us suggesting structural change.

Part of the council's vision is to:

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- Create a better borough through digital innovation, providing seamless connectivity for all, encouraging more take-up of information and services online
- Work with our customers to develop quality services that are accessible to all and to make every contact count

This reflects a desire to drive the digital offer on the part of the council whilst maintaining 'traditional' customer service approaches. Enhancing connectivity, with superfast broadband provision already to 98.5% of the borough and free public Wi-Fi in a wide range of council and community buildings, is a crucial part of this. Another key aspect is focusing on people's ability to access digital, as seen with the provision of free access to computers (with nearly 96,000 hours of usage in 2019/20) and the provision of free devices to help vulnerable adults and children during the pandemic under the 'Kindle Kindness' and 'Laptops for Learners' initiatives. Linked to this, the council recognises the importance of supporting people in their ability to access services digitally. This 'up-skilling' includes the likes of Telford Online drop-in sessions and specific support for job seekers at libraries. The ambitions around a digital hub in the new Station Quarter development represent a further example of that desire to aid people's take-up of technology.

There are, however, cautionary notes being sounded by partners around the drive for digital, with emphasis placed upon avoiding excluding people from accessing services. Key here, as well as the social disadvantage that this would represent, is anybody experiencing difficulties in accessing council services digitally, going through partner organisations retaining face to face provision – essentially an issue of 'problem-shunting'.

Our sense is that the council recognises all of these potential risks and is seeking to mitigate them through the approaches it has adopted. There are, though, three areas that the authority might like to consider in order to reduce those risks further. The first concerns people being able to have complex issues dealt with and being able to get through to the right person when they need to. This links to points we made earlier around the 'depth' of the customer contact centre service and looking at how people experience managing 'life events' but also relates to feedback we received regarding ease of contact with the current range of intelligent voice recognition options (IVR) causing confusion for some. The second is seeking to ensure the 'upskilling' offer avoids any sense of 'Telford-centrism', with it being important to ensure people can access the support available from across the borough. The final area concerns the benefit we would see in profiling the wider socio-economic benefits of 'up-skilling' in order to broaden the discussion beyond one of potential exclusion from council services to that of digital inclusion as a key 'un-locker' that helps around, for example, issues of rurality, accessing the jobs market and tackling social isolation.

The council is seeking to establish an 'Everything Speaks' culture which entails delivering consistent standards of service across the organisation, paying attention to detail, continuing to

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get the basics right and living the Co-operative Values. This 'culture piece' will inevitably take time, with that journey still being at a relatively early stage following the launch of the customer strategy and 'Everything Speaks' just in the last few months. Key elements that we have already outlined, such as the philosophy that is already established in the council around customer service; the passion that people hold for the borough and serving its residents; and the pride staff feel in working for the organisation are really solid building blocks. All of this needs to be captured in a shared narrative around 'Everything Speaks' so that the overall concept and the principles and beliefs that sit at the heart of it are made easily understandable and can be clearly conveyed – keeping it simple will be key. Currently, 'Everything Speaks' and what it entails is not being consistently articulated, even amongst those relatively close to it. The council's communications function can play a crucial role here in the development of the narrative.

We have a key thought that emerges from within the work the council has asked us to undertake and which links to the range of opportunities, plus the risks, that we have outlined in our feedback. This concerns the potential development by the council of a 'channel roadmap' and sitting the emerging digital strategy within this. What we are suggesting is a broader piece of work than the digital strategy, enabling thinking and planning around future 'channel shift' to be considered fully 'in the round'. Such a roadmap would provide a comprehensive overview of the different options available to people for accessing different services and how any proposed shifts within this would impact upon, or need to be compensated for, by adjustments elsewhere within the council's overall approach.

We conclude by posing a question for the council to consider in the period that lies ahead. This is very simply whether the variety of visions, straplines and brands that exist across the council risks causing confusion? Within this, is there a need to establish greater clarity in relation to the authority's branding? We don't profess to have the answers here. Our question is based simply on the range of different concepts and images that we came across in our preparatory reading and when talking with people using council-related backgrounds on their computer screens. Essentially, we weren't left with an impression of a 'cohesive whole' and the council will want to determine how much of an issue that is and whether it wishes to respond to it.

5. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Telford and Wrekin Council for undertaking the peer challenge of customer services and digital.

We appreciate that the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

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Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Helen Murray (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her e-mail address is helen.murray@local.gov.uk

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