

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

26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> May 2021

Feedback Letter

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## 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 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> 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](mailto:helen.murray@local.gov.uk)

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