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| <b>Subject:</b>                        | Customer Services Continual Improvement Plan and Web Development | <b>Status:</b>           | For Publication  |
| <b>Report to:</b>                      | Cabinet  | <b>Date:</b>             | 19 <sup>th</sup> July 2022   |
| <b>Report of:</b>                      | Director of Communities  | <b>Portfolio Holder:</b> | Communities  |
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## 1. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 That Cabinet note the result of consultations and agree the attached Customer Services Improvement Plan.
- 1.2 That Cabinet agree to the procurement of a new website and digital improvements through the company Jadu using a procurement framework.

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The council has re-examined its approach to how it responds to customer enquiries, requests and complaints.
- Whilst our customers generally receive a good service the council recognises there are areas where it needs to improve the quality and consistency of the response to customers.
- A range of consultations and surveys have taken place in the past six months which have helped to inform a Customer Services Continual Improvement Plan.
- This report summarises the improvements that have previously been implemented to improve customer services, the approach taken to consultation, the key findings of those consultations and the resultant key actions included within the plan.
- This report summarises the key findings in relation to the council's existing website, the scope for a new website and a recommendation that Jadu are procured to undertake the work using an existing procurement framework.
- In February 2022, Council approved a sum of £80k to develop the website and digital customer offer.

## 3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Over the past two years, a number of improvements have been introduced to improve our services to customers, these improvements have included:

- Agreeing a Digital Strategy which sets the vision for our future digital services and establishes the required investment to improve our digital offer
- All staff have been trained in customer service excellence
- Established a robust complaints and enquiries system
- Established monitoring arrangements for our partnership with Capita, setting a strong performance and governance framework for our largest area of customer contact.
- Developed and are currently implementing Corporate Values which emphasise putting the customer first
- Introduced Middle Manager and All Staff sessions which focus on continually improving our services.
- Introduced technology that allows flexible working whilst ensuring standards of customer care are retained
- Introduced new protocols to improve the general quality of call handling and emails.
- Introduced feedback cards for refuse staff which can be given to residents who wish to contact the council about any council services

3.2 During April and May of this year, the Council conducted a residents' survey to better understand our residents' perceptions of Rossendale as a place and their satisfaction with Council services. This survey included questions regarding the current website. In addition three focus groups were held, staff surveys undertaken and mystery shopping exercises conducted. A new telephone system introduced in April 2022 has provided detailed calls data that has also been used to inform the action plan.

3.3 Key Findings from the residents' survey included:

- 735 responses were received from a mix of online returns and face to face surveys
- 47% have contacted the council in the past 6 months
- The most popular method of contacting the Council is telephone (45%) followed by email (38%) which is a sharp rise in email contact compared to 2019 (26%)
- A strong desire from residents to see all town centres improved
- 60% rated the refuse service as good or excellent
- 75% rated the conditions of local roads as poor (though residents have a high awareness that this is a County Council service)
- Fly Tipping was seen as a key concern of residents with 72% seeing it as a significant or slight issue
- The most popular method of finding out about the Council is social media (64%) with 23% using the Council website for this
- 13% rated the Council website as poor with 31% rating is at average. 21% suggested it was good or excellent
- Focus groups were generally much more positive about services and the website

3.4 This report focuses on the findings from all the consultations that relate to customer services and the website. The report is not intended to provide a comprehensive summary of all the evidence gathered, but rather provide a rationale for the actions included in the plan and the scope for the new website.

3.5 Officers have identified the following key areas of focus for the plan:

- Provide services based on what the customer wants – Understanding the customer
- Getting the Culture Right
- Getting the Systems Right
- Demonstrating and Maintaining Success

## 4. IMPROVING CUSTOMER SERVICE

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- 4.1 This section summarises key evidence gathered relating to each priority area and the actions proposed.

### **Understanding the Customer**

- 4.2 In the past six months, extensive work has been undertaken to understand our customers and their perceptions and satisfaction with council services. The action plan includes an ongoing commitment to repeat the residents' survey annually, to use focus groups regularly and expand their use to include consultation on major service changes. The resident survey in future years will be better aligned with the surveys undertaken nationally by the Local Government Association. This will allow us to benchmark more accurately against the national satisfaction rating for councils which in 2022 is 64%, up from 56% in 2021. Our figures are not directly comparable, however 24% of respondents expressed some dissatisfaction with our services.
- 4.3 Mystery Shopping will be embedded and undertaken regularly to monitor call response across all services. This year we introduced follow up calls to customers by Corporate Management Team Members. This allows the quality of the overall response to be better understood. This will continue with six calls being made by each member of CMT each month.
- 4.4 When a service is developing a new strategy that requires community engagement, we will utilise our Communities team expertise across the council to provide advice and support. We will also create a repository for customer and resident data which can inform our service delivery.

### **Getting the Systems Right**

- 4.5 The most popular method of contacting the Council is by telephone, with 45% of residents using this method. Call data illustrates that we take approximately 1600 calls each week with 65% being answered by One Stop Shop, 31% by Corporate Support and 4% being answered by Licensing. The average length of calls range between 2 and 4 minutes. Average caller wait times or ring times are below 1 minute 30 seconds for One Stop Shop. This compares well with others. For calls into other parts of the council, ring time average below 50 seconds.
- 4.6 A key action in the plan is to utilise the new telephone system reporting to produce monthly performance dashboards which will help us address underperformance in any particular area. This will provide essential data to enable effective resource planning across the organisation.
- 4.7 Preferred methods of contacting the council match very closely with how people do actually contact us. Telephone accounts for 45% of contact and emails 38%.
- 4.8 The preferred method of finding out information about the Council is through social media (64%) followed by the council website (23%). Residents are clearly using national social media platforms to track what the council is doing and to find out information. This is a significant shift over recent years and more traditional methods like local print media. An action will be undertaken to increase the amount of information and 'good news' stories shared on social media and to improve our website. This should help improve the profile and reputation of the council as well as responding to the preferences of residents.
- 4.9 Focus groups suggested a high level of satisfaction with the One Stop Shop and the appointment system was welcomed as it allowed most queries to be completed over the phone. When an appointment was necessary, customers were informed of everything they needed to bring with them, reducing repeat visits.

- 4.10 We will embed the appointment system for One Stop Shop as the permanent model and to evaluate what other services could utilise the space within the One Stop Shop now it is less busy.
- 4.11 Focus groups highlighted that the automated voice answering system is unpleasant and that there are too many menu options before a human operator is reached. Introducing a new voice answering system is in progress and will be in place for August 2022. The new system will have a human voice and will streamline the options available. The new system will allow all Rossendale staff to record a personal message and it allows the customer to be routed directly to the person who the customer has asked for more quickly.
- 4.12 The recent Member survey supports customer survey data to suggest initial contact is generally good. However, in certain service areas requests and enquiries are not always followed up as desired. Refuse services score positively for satisfaction overall but were highlighted as an area that could improve in terms of responsiveness when things do go wrong. Work has identified that a key barrier to ensuring requests are followed up is the different software systems used by Corporate Support and Operations. These two systems do not allow for easy updates on enquiries between the two services. It is likely that both systems will continue to be used. However, it will be possible to move as many customer related elements as possible on to the customer facing Idox system used by Corporate Support. This will improve responsiveness and customer feedback.
- 4.13 Mystery Shopping did highlight that a high number of calls that are diverted to an internal extension are going to answerphone. The new telephone system presents the opportunity to more easily divert calls and use of 'hunt groups' to ensure calls are answered by a member of the team. An action is included in the plan to fully utilise these features where appropriate and aim to reduce the dependence on answerphones.
- 4.14 Although Refuse scored relatively well in terms of overall satisfaction, we know the number of missed bins is slightly higher than we would like. We are assessing the use of In-Cab technology to improve the real time monitoring of refuse collections and improve our feedback and response to the customer.
- 4.15 The residents survey highlighted dissatisfaction with the borough's roads with 75% of respondents rating them as poor. There was a high level of recognition that it is Lancashire County Council that maintain the roads. Focus groups suggested that it was not always clear how to contact LCC and that they tended to contact Rossendale Council to report and chase issues rather than contact LCC direct. An improvement to the current system of providing numbers to customers or reporting on their behalf is to have a number on our telephone system that transfers the customer automatically to LCC. There is a cost to this and it is being investigated further.

### **Getting the Culture Right**

- 4.16 Focus groups commended the council on the helpfulness and friendliness of officers. We do wish to ensure that this is consistent across all services. Work has been undertaken in the past 12 months to engage staff in improving how we respond to customers and Elected Members. This includes introducing customer focussed corporate values, specific training for all staff and additional all staff sessions every 6 months along with Middle Manager sessions every quarter. These sessions will continue as part of the action plan.

- 4.17 Mystery Shopping demonstrated that Corporate Support answer calls quickly and use the correct greeting. However, the picture is more mixed for other services with 70% using the correct greeting. An action is included to undertake refresher training for all staff each year on customer services and to emphasise and embed current protocols. Mystery Shopping will continue to monitor our levels of service.
- 4.18 A high number of services requests relate to our Refuse services and this remains a key area of focus. Changes have taken place such as operations staff sitting with Corporate Support each week but a more structured joint customer service improvement group will be developed to use the wealth of data now available to make further improvements. Embedding new protocols or systems within services does require a strong constancy of purpose and customer service champions have proved very successful in this. An action has been included to expand the number of customer service champions by combining it with the role of web champion in each service.

### **Demonstrating and Maintaining Success**

- 4.19 Work has been undertaken to research what is required to obtain an accredited customer services award such as the Customer Services Excellence Award or the Institute of Customer Services accreditation. This accreditation provides an established framework to improve and is an external sign of progress. It is proposed that once the immediate improvements are implemented, a full evaluation of these models will be undertaken.
- 4.20 Many actions previously mentioned in this report will help us to demonstrate our quality of service and to monitor improvements. This includes undertaking the annual resident survey, focus groups, customer feedback and mystery shopping. In addition the post of the Corporate Performance Officer will be adapted to include customer service excellence.
- 4.21 The Customer Services Improvement Action Plan – which captures all the actions - is attached as an appendix to this report.

## **5. A BETTER COUNCIL WEBSITE**

- 5.1 Over the past twelve months a series of improvements have taken place as part of our work to deliver the digital customer element of our Digital Strategy which was agreed by council in 2021. This has included offering more online forms for revenues and benefits services, improving the searching and viewing of planning applications on the website and a range of security enhancements.
- 5.2 The digital customer strand includes improvements to our website and also to many connected functions such as forms and integrated systems. Funding for these improvements has been agreed by council and are included in the Medium Term Financial Strategy. We are keen to further improve the current website.
- 5.3 There are technical limitations to the existing website. Its architecture relies on a shared template model. This is very cost effective to purchase initially but does prove inflexible and expensive when it comes to updating any design element of the website. Our website template is shared with other councils and the provider Jadu is hoping to move away from supporting the shared template model and move to each authority having their own individual template. It is likely that support will end in the next few years for the shared template model, although no confirmation of timescales have been provided. The website connects to a number of other software packages to share information; the smooth integration of these systems is critical to an effective customer experience when using the web. Over time this integration will become more costly and difficult with our existing website solution.

5.4 In addition to these technical limitations, a refreshed website allows us to review what residents, elected members and staff want to see from the council website and better meet their requirements. Extensive consultation has taken place through the resident survey, focus groups and with staff web champions. The results of this consultation has enabled a firm proposal to be developed.

5.5 The key findings included:

- 13% of residents stated the website was poor versus 21% who think it is good or excellent. A high level (31%) stated that it was average.
- 38% of residents state that they contact the council via email, this is likely to be via a website link. 5.4% stated specifically that they contact the council via the website.
- Focus groups and comments through the resident survey do suggest a high satisfaction with the website due to its simplicity and search functionality. Though they do think the site is dull and that it does not promote the borough very well due to a lack of photos and up to date information on the homepage.
- Web champions like the simplicity of the current website and like that it is easy to update.
- The high number of clicks to access a download was highlighted.
- Certain forms on the website were described as clunky to use and this was a common view, for example the garden waste bin application process.
- It was commented that very little up to date news is immediately visible on the website and it is not attractive. It was also commented that there are no links to social media feeds.
- A commonly held view was that the website should be more dynamic and provide a more positive impression of the borough.
- There are pages that include out of date information. A full content audit is underway to address this.

5.6 By refreshing the website and moving to a different architecture which uses our own individual template, we will be able to incorporate changes to address this feedback. For example, we will be able to incorporate photos and a moving carousel to provide up to date information promoting the council and the borough. We will be able to link to social media and display social media feeds if required. Forms and downloading files will be quicker and more functional as forms will be incorporated into the website itself.

5.7 Options for the procurement of a refreshed website have been examined. A simple redesign of the existing website would be limited due to the shared template but colours could be changed. Photos, carousels and social media links are not possible and it will be costly to upgrade colours etc. for limited benefit.

5.8 It is possible to commission a bespoke website designed specifically for Rossendale Council. This does require substantial staff input and the purchase of substantial developer time. Estimated costs for a simple bespoke website are in excess of £120k and it is likely to take at least 18 months to fully implement. This is over the budget allocated and it is considered over-

engineering for our purposes. It could also introduce complexities when integrating with other systems.

5.9 The preferred solution is to procure an individual template model via Jadu our existing provider. This template will also be based on more recent software architecture which improves functionality and future integration. The website would retain the current taxonomy in terms of data structure but would enable photographic backgrounds, social feeds and links, revolving carousels.

5.10 The cost of this option excluding our own staffing costs is £77,800. A capital allocation of £80k is available for the work. This option would include migration to the new system and new forms development. It should be noted that migrating to a new website will require Council staff to undertake considerable work to re-populate parts of the website. This does however also provide the opportunity to refresh content to ensure its relevance and accuracy.

5.11 Full Council agreed an allocation of £80k in the Medium Term Financial Strategy for the improvement of digital customer contact and it is recommended that we procure the new website from Jadu under a procurement framework. Once the contract is let, there will be further consultation and engagement to engage customers, staff and elected members in its final design.

## **6. RISK**

6.1 There is a risk in continuing with our existing website which has limitations in terms of customer experience and also will present increasing risk in terms of future integration and support.

6.2 Procurement and development of a new website introduces a risk of unforeseen integration issues. These will be minimized by staying with our current provider. There is a further risk that staff will not be able to dedicate the time to migrating content and checking content. A strong corporate commitment to ensuring web champions are allocated specific time to migrate and verify their pages will be needed.

## **7. FINANCE**

The Council's 2022/23 Capital Programme includes £80k for procurement of an updated website.

## **8. LEGAL**

The procurement of the new website will be via a framework call off. This is in compliance with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules and Public Procurement regulations. An appropriate call off agreement will be entered into with Jadu which reflects the needs of the Council.

## **9. POLICY AND EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 The customer services improvement plan and web development with support the delivery of the Council's Corporate Plan and support the effective and efficient delivery of customers services of the council.

9.2 Any equality implications related to the implementation of the customer services improvement plan will be given consideration in a relevant and proportionate manner.

## **10. REASON FOR DECISION**

10.1 The Customer Services Continual Improvement Action Plan is based on extensive customer consultation and will make improvements to our levels of customer service in a short space of time. The council agreed to develop plans for a new website as part of the digital strategy

agreed by council in late 2021. This report provides an outline scope and procurement approach for the website in order to progress the work.

| Background Papers |   |
|-------------------|---|
| Document          | Place of Inspection   |
| Digital Strategy  | <a href="https://www.rossendale.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/1249/council">https://www.rossendale.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/1249/council</a> |