OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE TASK AND FINISH GROUP REPORT

COMMUNICATING WITH CUSTOMERS

JUNE 2017

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In 2016 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to implement a Task and Finish Group to look at how the Council communicates with its residents, and subsequently whether the Council is providing an efficient and effective service to its customers.

1.2 Improving communication is one of the key priorities of the Council, which includes:-
   - Listening and communicating
   - Honesty and transparency
   - Community and customer focussed

1.3 It should be noted that the initial suggestion was to look at the effectiveness of the Council's website, however it transpired that a new website was in the pipeline to be implemented. Therefore the Group would concentrate on effective communication to customers, as outlined at paragraph 1.1.

2. THE AIM OF THE GROUP

2.1 A meeting was held with the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny to discuss how this piece of work should be undertaken and whether the scrutiny process could make a difference.

2.2 The Group was made up of 5 cross-party Councillors and Councillor Hughes was appointed as Chair of the Group. The aim of the group was:-

'To review the effectiveness and efficiency of how the Council communicates with its customers.'

2.3 To achieve the aim, the group would:-

   - Seek to examine the Council's existing access channels
   - Look at the times at which certain departments are receiving telephone calls
   - Review whether the Council are providing an easy to use way in which its customers can communicate
   - Be kept informed of the work of the group looking at the current website

2.4 The ultimate aim of the Task and Finish Group is to ensure that the Council has a Communication Strategy and Action Plan for the next five years that ensures a consistent approach to communicating with residents and that customers are encouraged to be self-serving where possible. This would be via using the Council's website, telephone, social media and other popular communication methods.

2.5 Before any Communication Strategy or Action Plan can be developed, the Group felt it was essential to establish what the Council is currently doing to improve the way it communicates. Therefore the work of this Task and Finish

Group would be to inform and support a council-wide communications strategy/plan.

2.6   The Group wanted to ensure that the Council has a monitoring system in place to develop a consistent and co-ordinated approach across all council departments and that this is managed appropriately.

2.7   The Group considered it essential that the Council makes its residents better informed via the appropriate channels

3.   DEFINING GOOD COMMUNICATION

3.1   Effective communication with local people and organisations is essential to achieving effective local government. Good communication relates to the Council's role as a community leader, to achieving customer focus and to supporting local democracy through increasing local knowledge and accountability for service delivery.

3.2   There is an increasing desire for many customers to do things online and this extends to local government. The use of automated services is also increasing. It is therefore essential that the Council ensures its methods of communication are adequate and are able to provide a high level of service.

3.3   However, it should not be forgotten that there are customers who do not want their only contact with the Council to be online and the Council needs to ensure that it continues to engage with those customers.

4.   CURRENT COMMUNICATION ARRANGEMENTS

4.1   The Council does use leaflets to engage with customers and these are summarised as follows:-

- Waste and Recycling News – a leaflet distributed to all households in December each year which explains dates and times when residents can expect their household/recycling waste will be collected.
- Council Tax Explains – this is delivered mid-March each year and explains the customer's council tax bill. Occasionally additional information is sent out with the bill such as opening times of local health services etc.
- Electoral Information – information is delivered in July each year informing residents they should be on the electoral roll and reminders are sent out in September/October.

4.2   The Council's website is a valuable source of information and point of contact for customer transactions as a low-cost alternative to face-to-face and telephone contact. A piece of work is being undertaken to overhaul and re-launch the website with the aim of providing a much improved and easily accessible digital platform. The aim of this project is to provide customers with a new website that looks more modern and is more user-friendly. The Council wants to increase the ability for customers to interact with us at a time

that suits them online by creating the ability to us services and to order and pay for items online. By doing this it is hoped to improve customer satisfaction in communicating with the Council and improve the speed and efficiency of processes, resulting in savings.

4.3 The Council makes use of social media to spread information and good news stories about the Council. It also provides a platform for customers to air their views to and about the Council. Some facts and figures about the Council's social media usage are below:-

Facebook
- The Council's Facebook page currently has 1,552 'likes' and this has increased in April/May by 40.

Bacup THI Facebook Page
- The running of the page has been devolved to the Project Officer with a view to replicating this in other service areas.
- Number of people reached by the page: 3072 (April to May) which is an increase of 1336 per cent
- Number of post engagements 594 (April to May) which is an increase of 1700 per cent
- 23 new 'likes' (April to May)

Twitter
- The Council's Twitter account currently has 5878 followers.

5. WORK CARRIED OUT

5.1 Officer Member Workshop – a workshop, made up of Councillors and Officers took place on 12th October 2016. The workshop gave officers the opportunity listen to each other's issues with communication and to make suggestions and proposals for the Task and Finish Group's work, which may enable officers and members to drive through new ideas.

5.2 Following the workshop, an additional meeting was held to speak to those services who were not able to be represented at the workshop. Following the workshop and this meeting, an 'Action List' was compiled which summarised the issues which had arisen.

5.3 A final phase 1 meeting was held on 1st March 2017 which was attended by the Head of Customer Services and ICT and the Action List was amended to an 'Issues Log'. It was agreed that this would be sent to Corporate Management Team on 21st March for comments.

5.4 A response was received from the Director of Communities. In summary, all actions have been implemented with the exception of work on customer standards. This work will be completed over the summer and a follow-up meeting will be arranged late August/early September to review a draft set of customer standards.

6.   CONCLUSIONS

6.1   After the work carried out by the Task and Finish Group at the end of Phase 1, the following conclusions were drawn:-

- The majority of council publications are currently produced by individual service areas.
- The new website was welcomed by the Task and Finish Group and the new site was envisaged as the first point customer contact and should be more accessible and based around customer requirements and best practice.
- The workshop was an excellent and useful way of finding out information about service area's standards and for officers to learn more about each other's areas and issues.
- The need for a more consistent and unified approach to with regards to service standards was apparent.
- Corporate Support required additional support to ensure they have the most appropriate telephony systems to deal with the customer contact centre which is being set up within that service area.
- Social media, whilst used, could be used more effectively to communicate with residents.

6.2   Following a positive response from Corporate Management Team, the work of this Task and Finish Group is now complete, save for a follow up meeting to review the draft customer standards.

7.   RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1   That the council develops a Communication Strategy that explains how we communicate to residents and which incorporates:-
- Website
- Telephone
- Social media and the use of paid advertising
  - Facebook
  - Twitter

7.2   That the recommendations in the issues log continue to be implemented.

7.3   That the Group will meet one more time in late August/early September to review the draft customer standards.