



## Overview and Scrutiny Committee 5 December 2012

### Report from the Director of Customer and Community Engagement

For Information

#### **Future Customer Services: Delivering change to the way Brent residents access services**

#### **1.0 Summary**

1.1 This report provides an update on progress in establishing new arrangements for Customer Services following the Future of Customer Services project and the creation of the Brent Customer Services Unit in January 2012.

1.2 The key aims of the Future Customer Services project were to :

- i. Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery to our customers so that we better meet customer needs and reduce the call on council resources;
- ii. Develop a more consistent and cohesive approach to the provision of customer services, across all access channels and all services.
- iii. Create greater capacity to respond to peaks in customer contact through multi skilling and more flexible alignment of resources to peaks in customer demand
- iv. moving services to the front office so that we can resolve enquiries at the first point of contact, ensure consistently high standards and have a consistent approach to improving our customer services;

#### **2.0 Recommendation**

2.1 PCG note the progress that has been made in establishing new arrangements for Customer Services.

2.2 Note the progress that has been made in implementing plans to ensure a smooth transition to the Civic Centre and to mitigate the impact of exceptional peaks in customer demand arising from welfare reforms.

- 2.3 Note the need to develop plans to achieve a channel migration strategy and evaluate the most relevant approach for achieving this.

### **3.0 Changes implemented as part of the Future Customer Services project**

- 3.1 Phase 1 of the Future Customer Services project, provided the foundations for the improvements needed to customer services in Brent. The changes put in place are facilitating:

- The development of a coherent cross-council strategy for Customer Services;
- The provision of clear and consistent customer access arrangements;
- Understanding of all customer demand and forecast changes;
- The flexible use of resources to meet customer demand.

The changes implemented through the Future Customer Services project were as follows:

#### **3.2 Creation of a new Brent Customer Services division in January 2012**

The new Brent Customer Services Unit was created on 2 January 2012 bringing together the former One Stop Service, Revenues and Benefits, and Pupil and Parent Support within Children and Families. It has responsibility for handling both end to end service delivery and customer contact relating to a range of services including benefits, council tax, adult social care, streetcare, pest control, school admissions, the schools information service and general customer enquiries. More lately it has taken over responsibility for blue badges, freedom passes and taxi cards.

#### **3.3 Services transferred during 2012**

The children's information service was transferred in April 2012. This service provides advice and information to parents and other agencies about child care and other services supporting families in Brent.

The chronically sick and disabled team transferred in October 2012. This team processes blue badges, freedom passes and the taxi card scheme.

#### **3.4 Services due to transfer in 2013**

Two Customer Services officers from the Housing Needs Unit will transfer to Brent Customer Services (Brent Customer Services) in July 2013 following the opening of the Civic centre.

A number of other service and process reviews have also been carried out and have led to decisions to continue management of customer handling within the service area. These include licencing, transportation and Registration and Nationality. These decisions have been based on an evaluation of the most effective methods for managing customer contact for

these services at this time. These decisions will be kept under review by the Customer Services Board.

### **3.5 Customer Services Board**

Concurrent with the creation of the new BCS unit, a new Customer Services Board was also established. This board has strategic responsibility for overall customer services arrangements, monitoring and reviewing performance across the Council and directing and overseeing projects and work programmes. The Board members are senior managers representing all service areas and is chaired by the Director of Customer and Community Engagement.

3.6 The Board has been effective in driving performance improvements, overseeing projects and making key decisions in relation to these and shaping future priorities and work programmes.

### **3.7 Review of the Web and Channel migration strategy**

A key element to the overall Customer Services strategy is to optimise opportunities for using digital channels to improve our customers' experience and to achieve efficient ways of delivering services. This is in the context of the considerable financial challenges the Council faces amidst increasing customer demands and expectations.

3.8 The Future Customer Services project included a number of short term improvements aimed at increasing use of online services and implementation of longer term building blocks aimed to support modernisation of our customer offer and best place Brent to respond to the many challenges it faces.

### **3.9 Short term aims achieved**

Since January there has been targeted action to improve the Council line offer using the council's web current system. This has included a redesign of the web front page, a range of new online forms and a new online booking system for services such as pest control and summer events.

Other targeted achievements have included:

- A new integrated e benefits form for Housing and Council tax benefit. This automatically populates the Benefits back office system and this removes the need for Assessment Officers to transfer form details to the computer system.
- A new on line housing application form that covers both homeless applications and those applying for housing through the waiting list.
- A major drive to increase take up of on lines school applications - which resulted in a 93% take up for secondary school applications for the 2013/14 in take compared to 50% for the 201 2/1 in take.

- Development of a suite of on line services for parking (permits, payments for penalty charge notices) which are due to go live in later November.

### **3.10 Longer Term Aims**

#### **New Web Governance**

A new web governance policy was agreed in April 2012 to ensure that management of the Council web site was coherent and consistent. The transfer of the web team to BCS in January 2012 and these new governance arrangements now mean that the design, content and formatting of the web site is controlled centrally. This will support our aim to ensure that the website is designed from our customers' point of view rather than from the perspective of internal service boundaries. It will also help to ensure that the website is managed holistically rather than as discrete pages.

### **3.11 Fundamental Review of Content**

A fundamental review of web content is currently in progress and this will result in a significant reduction to the number of web pages currently displayed. There are currently 5000 pages, some of which have never been viewed by our customers, some are out of date, many are difficult to find and there is no consistency in the format and style of information and forms presented. The new website will have significantly fewer pages and these will be easier to access and find. The content of the web will be regularly reviewed.

### **3.12 New Content Management System**

A Business Case for replacing the council's current web Content Management System was agreed in February 2012. A new project was instigated to oversee the implementation of this new system and this is due to go live in January 2013. The new Content Management System will significantly improve customers' experience of the web, making it easier to search and navigate pages. The overall content feel of the website has been redesigned to make this more intuitive for our customers' to use and thus encourage and increase customers' ability to use on line services and information wherever possible. The current content management system has a number of limitations in its flexibility to make changes and thus its replacement is a key milestone in developing and extending our digital offer to our customers.

### **3.13 Channel Migration strategy**

The new content management system will improve our customers' experience of the web but it will not fundamentally change the way in which we deliver services without a clear strategy and plans for achieving this. The Customer Services Board has agreed a Channel migration strategy which sets out our broad aims for developing our digital offer and the key actions that will support achievement of this. This is attached as Appendix A.

3.14 Consideration is now being given to overall approach to this next phase of the overall transformation of our customer services offer and how this should and can be achieved. In particular there are decisions to be made as to whether we pursue an approach which requires significant investment and risk but potentially offers opportunities to change existing service delivery models or we adopt a more incremental and targeted approach which will require less up front investment and risk but with less benefits.

3.15 A new digital strategy group has recently been set up to consider whether a digital by default strategy could or should be the future strategy adopted by Brent. This is considering all internal business processes not just those relating to customer contact. The outcomes of these discussions will assist in clarifying the best approach for significant delivering channel migration.

### **3.16 Creation of a digital post room**

A review of post functions across the Council was completed in April 2012 following decisions to consolidate post handling into the new BCS Unit. The current decentralised nature of post management means that we do not have a clear picture of post volumes, the types of post being handled or performance in relation to response times for many service areas. (This does exist for some services, most specifically those that have already implemented Electronic document management systems or with high volumes of transactional processes). The absence of comprehensive management information about post makes it difficult to evaluate the extent to which channel migration could replace postal contact.

3.17 The review of post has identified that there are approximately 7-800 thousand items of post received by the Council on a weekly basis. Approximately 60% of this post is currently scanned, either before or after processing, with 40% currently being handled and stored as a paper document. The digital post room is being created to enable all post to be converted to a scanned image and routed electronically to the intended recipient and thus support new ways of working in the Civic Centre. The Civic Centre has been designed as a paper light building with limited facilities for storage of paper and as such there is a critical need to design out paper based processes before its opening in April 2013.

3.18 The Digital Post Room (DPR) project is aiming to have implemented digital post handling for all buildings prior to the move the Civic Centre. The technical infrastructure for enabling this has been procured and is being set up in readiness to commence conversion of the first building, Brent House, in December 2012. A restructure of staff in scope for the DPR has also been finalised, creating a small team of 12 officers with a team leader, currently based on 8<sup>th</sup> floor Brent House. The team is due to move to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of Brent House in early December when the scanning of Brent house post first commences.

- 3.19 It is planned to convert post for remaining buildings between January and the move dates for the Civic Centre. Chesterfield House will be prioritised in January because Children and Families are one of the first services to move into the Civic Centre.
- 3.20 Once the Digital Post room has been established, a programme of improvement initiatives will be agreed with the Customer Services Board. These will seek to exploit the Kofax software that we have invested in, to improve our ability to automatically route post without the need for human intervention and carry out automation of tasks.

### **Management of telephone contact**

- 3.21 All telephone contact handled by Brent Customer Services is managed using Automatic Call Distribution (ACD). This enables calls to be directed to staff with an appropriate skill set, gives clear visibility of volumes of calls waiting and resources available to handle these, facilities to promote key messages during busy times and a raft of management information. ACD technology has been implemented since January 2012 for the schools admission service, Children and Families information service and concessionary travel (blue badges, freedom passes and taxi cards) during 2012. It has been in use for Benefits and Council Tax for many years.
- 3.22 Other services are also using ACD technology, in particular Housing Needs, Registration and Nationalities and Brent Housing Partnership and for these services we have a good understand of the volumes of telephone calls received and performance in relation to call answering rates.
- 3.23 The picture for services not utilising ACD technology is not as clear. Although management information is available for call volumes, it is not possible to separately identify external customer calls from internal calls and reported answer rates do not separately report calls answered by voice mail from those answered by a staff member. Work is currently underway to evaluate how ACD technology could be extended further to improve management of telephone calls and develop a better overall picture of call volumes and performance. Decisions will be made before the end of December and implementation will be planned during 2013.
- 3.24 A review of published telephone numbers and email addresses is also in progress with a view to rationalising these and making it easier for customer to identify the correct number to contact for their enquiry. This is being co ordinated with the launch of the Council's new web site in January. Further work is planned for 2013 to develop a broader contact strategy which will inform our telephone contact plans going forward. This will be considered in the light of channel migration plans and the extent to which we want to direct customers to digital channels instead of telephony services and as such the prominence of published telephone contact details on our web site.

- 3.25 A new automated switchboard was implemented in January 2012 which uses voice recognition to automatically route callers without the need for a switchboard operator. Automatic transfer rates were initially around 45% of all calls received but these have been steadily increased to 65% and we are aiming to increase these to circa 80% over time. The automated switchboard has enabled us to utilise staff previously handling switch board calls, to handling customer enquiries and thus increase our capacity to respond to peaks in customer demand.

### **Face to Face customer contact**

- 3.26 Some time ago the Council decided to implement a revised face to face contact model that was based on 2 main access points, the Civic Centre in the North and Willesden in the South. The implementation of this requires customer contact for a range of buildings to be merged and brought together into these 2 access points by the summer of July 2013.
- 3.27 The first phase of the merging of face to face contact occurred in January 2012 when schools admissions contact was transferred from Chesterfield House to the local offices at Brent House, Willesden and the Town Hall. More recently customer contact for the Town Hall has been transferred to Brent House in preparation for the move to the Civic Centre in May 2013.
- 3.28 The new Customer Services Centre in the Civic Centre will accommodate all face to face contact currently handled in Brent House, the Town Hall, Brent House Annexe and Mahatma Gandhi House. The centre will operate on a shared basis and will be utilised not just by Brent Customer Services Staff but also by the Youth Offending team, Housing Needs, Brent Housing Partnership and other services on an ad hoc basis. Services are being moved into the Civic Centre on a phased based between April and July which means that initially the Centre will only be occupied by Brent Customer Services. All services will be utilising this by July 2013.
- 3.29 The Registration and Nationalities Unit will continue to operate from the Town Hall until this moves to the Civic Centre. These will continue to be dedicated to Customer Access point for this service within the Civic Centre, with a modern marriage room and wedding garden.
- 3.30 A separate project reviewing parking services is also in progress which is currently implementing a comprehensive on line offer for parking permit, visitor parking passes and Penalty Charge notice payments. This is due to go live in January 2013 at which time Pyramid House will cease to operate as a face to face contact point. The second parking shop located in Walm Lane is planned to close in February 2013, subject to successful sign off of the new on line services.
- 3.31 Planned redevelopment of the current Willesden Green Library is also underway, this includes a new and improved customer services centre and will mirror the customer services centre in the Civic Centre. Subject to planning approval the redevelopment will take place over a period of about 18 months from the spring of 2013. During this time an interim customer

services access point is likely to be provided in Harlesden High Street on the third floor of the Job centre Plus building. This will offer comparable facilities to the current Willesden local office and is conveniently located for customers who would otherwise have visited Willesden library.

#### **4.0 Customer Services Performance**

Since the creation of the Brent Customer Services Unit in January 2012, we have been focussing on a number of key aims:

- To achieve a consistent and improved performance for all contact managed by BCS.
- To define and agree new performance measures that will provide a better understanding of the outcomes of customer handling
- To develop a comprehensive picture of all customer contacts received by the Council, across all service areas
- To develop a comprehensive understanding of customer service handling for all services

#### **4.1 Telephone performance**

Average telephone answering rates for Brent Customer Services have ranged between 78% to 84% since January 2012. We have also achieved greater consistency in the performance of individual teams by increasing knowledge and skills sets for staff. This has enabled us to have access to a larger pool of staff with the relevant knowledge and skills available to respond to the range of service enquiries received.

For services such as benefits, schools admissions and adult social care there is a need to balance requirements to process applications and assessments with the need to respond to telephone enquiries received from customers. Delays in processing and assessment have a direct impact on volumes of telephone calls received as customer chase progress and as such it is counterproductive to focus on answer rates at the expenses of maintain processing work.



4.2 Telephone performance for BCS for October is shown below

<b>Oct-12</b>	<b>Presented</b>	<b>Answered</b>	<b>% Ans</b>
<b>Adult SC</b>	2621	2096	80%
<b>Children SC</b>	973	739	76%
<b>Recycling and Waste</b>	5721	4728	83%
<b>Safer Streets</b>	1924	1663	86%
<b>General Info</b>	1960	1418	72%
<b>Switchboard (to ACD only)</b>	5236	3797	73%
<b>Children's Services</b>	5884	2396	41%
<b>CFIS</b>	372	317	85%
<b>Contact Centre - TOTAL</b>	<b>24691</b>	<b>17154</b>	<b>69%</b>
<b>Housing Benefit</b>	7434	6890	93%
<b>Council Tax</b>	10341	8989	87%
<b>Automated Switchboard (inc ACD)</b>	21513	17700	82%
<b>PHONES - TOTAL</b>	<b>58743</b>	<b>46936</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>September Total</b>	<b>56490</b>	<b>44266</b>	<b>78%</b>
<b>Year Average</b>	<b>51744</b>	<b>41517</b>	<b>80%</b>

4.3 Telephone performance for other Services

Calls Handled (on ACD)	October			September		
	Calls Offered	Calls Handled	%	Calls Offered	Calls Handled	%
Housing Needs	5,094	4,663	92%	5,109	4,298	84%
Registrars	5,290	4,196	79%	4,717	3,655	77%
Brent Housing Partnership	7,284	5,932	81%	5,675	4,648	82%
<b>Calls Handled (not on ACD)</b>						
Children and Families – Social Care	16,283	15,930	98%	14,659	14,388	98%
Brent Housing Partnership	13,823	12,898	93%	12,289	11,451	93%
Adult Social Care – Access and Assessment	9,570	8,212	86%	8,309	7,102	85%
Adult Social Care - Mental Health Service	9,039	8,521	94%	7,247	6,942	96%
Regen' & Major Projects - Housing	6,755	6,704	99%	5,830	5,798	99%

Note that telephone contacts not handled through an ACD system does not currently separate identify external calls from internal calls or to separately identify telephone calls that have been answered by a person rather than voicemail. This means that reported performance for the service shown in 4.3 as not handled on an ACD, is not comparable to those handled on ACD technology. We are considering extended use of ACD telephone call handling so that we can develop a more accurate picture of all external call handling.

#### **4.4 Face to face performance**

There are 2 key areas of focus for face to face performance, these are:

- Increasing our ability to resolve customer enquiries at the first point of contact and in so do provide customers with speedier resolution of their enquiry and a reduction in multiple handlings of queries by staff.
- Reducing waiting times for customer visiting customer access points.

4.5 The first of these aims is the most critical as this prevent the multiple contacts from customers that often arise when queries have to be passed on to another officer to resolve. The Lean reviews of Benefits, Council Tax and Housing Needs have all led to revised operating models that have moved away from a separation of front line and back office staff and as a result moved decisions makers into the front line, directly in contact with customers. This approach has improved the end delivery of these services to customers and delivered significant efficiencies.

4.6 In terms of waiting times, we have reconfigured our face to face operating model so that as many enquiries as possible are handled at the reception or fast track desks, without the need for the customer to take a ticket and wait until an officers assigned to a booth is available. This has proved to be very successful with 61% of all walk in customer demand being handled at reception and fast track points, within 5 minutes of arrival.

4.7 Appointments are also offered to benefit customer, who represent 70% of all BCS face to face enquiries and these customers are generally seen within 5 minutes of their appointment time.

4.8 Customers with more complex enquiries are directed to take a ticket and we aim to see these within 30 minutes. 66% of these customers are currently seen within 30 minutes and efforts are being made to further improve this percentage. In overall terms this means that only 13% of walk in customers (1300 out of 10,000) experience a wait time exceeding 30 minutes.

#### **5.0 Preparation for Civic Centre and Mitigating the impacts of Welfare Reform**

5.1 There are a raft of significant and unprecedented changes that the Council will need to manage in 2013, not least of which will be the impacts arising from welfare reforms. These changes coincide with the opening of the Civic Centre and the new Customer Services Centre alongside new ways of working for staff.

5.2 Brent Customer Services is playing a key role in preparing and planning for these changes and mitigating the risks that surround these. These include the following projects:

### **Council Tax Support**

- Design, implementation and risk mitigation for a new localised Council Tax Support scheme replacing the national Council tax Benefit scheme currently in operation. This will result in reductions Council tax assistance to 21,000 customers and representing at least 20% of their liability. 14,000 of these customer will be required to pay Council Tax for the first time, having previously received 100% Council tax Benefit to meet their liability. These changes take effect from 1 April 2013 and will be formally notified to customers when they receive their new Council Bill for 2013/14, between mid March to early April. The implementation is big bang unlike other welfare changes which have been phased in over a longer period of time.

### **Welfare Assistance Scheme**

- Design, implementation and risk management of a local, discretionary welfare assistance scheme. This replaces Social Fund payments for Crisis loans and Community Care Grants currently administered by the Department for Work and Pensions. These are in effect crisis payments to people who have no money to pay for essential items such as food or who have left institutions (prison, hostels etc) and need financial assistance to buy essential items for their new home typically white good such as cookers or fridges. There were 7200 of these payments made by DWP in 2011/12 representing expenditure of circa £1.0 Million. The grant being transferred to Brent is £855K which means that our local scheme will be unable to meet existing level of demand for payments at a time when welfare benefit reductions are likely to increase requests. It is also worth noting that the Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) which is administered by Local Authorities to mitigate hardship arising from welfare changes and other exceptional circumstances will be significantly increased in 2013/14 rising to an estimated £5m compared to £250K 3 years ago. The welfare Assistance scheme, DHPs and Council Tax Support alongside the introduction of Universal Credit later in 2013, will change the nature of benefits administration in Local Authorities. This will increasingly become localised and discretionary and the first point of access for people in financial crisis.

### **Other Welfare Changes**

- Implementation of other benefit changes, including the overall benefit cap which if applied will reduce Housing Benefit entitlement, reductions in benefit entitlement to tenants in social housing who are considered to be over accommodated and the implementation of Local Housing Allowance caps, which limit the amount of help that can be awarded in respect of Housing benefit for private rented properties.

## **Visitor Management in the Civic Centre**

- Development and implementation of plans to consolidate all face to face customer contact for services moving into the Civic Centre, through the development of a new operating model for the shared customer services centre. These plans include detailed forecasting of the likely number of customers who will visit the customer services centre following the opening of the Civic centre and plans to mitigate the identified pressures on the facilities available within the centre, most significantly waiting areas and private interview rooms. This has been supplemented with detailed mapping of customers' requirements when visiting the civic centre and the development of Service Level agreements with the various stakeholders involved in visitor management including facilities management, business support, the Youth Offending Team, Housing Needs and Brent Housing Partnership. Work is in progress to assess security requirements for the building and develop an overall security and incident management model, supported by security staff provided by the new Facilities Management contractor.
- Detailed plans are in progress to mitigate the impact of the exceptional spikes in customer contact that are forecast because of welfare reforms. It is unlikely that the facilities within the Civic Centre will be sufficient to handle these and as such options for an overflow customer access point are being evaluated for the spring of 2013. Additional temporary staff are being recruited from January to March to proactively contact customers who are worst affected by the changes and provide advice and guidance about the options available to them. These additional officers will remain in place for the first few months of the Civic Centre opening and will be allocated to a dedicated telephone team being set up to handle welfare reform enquiries and within face to face locations. These plans are being developed jointly with Capita who also forecast exceptional spikes in customer contact as customers query their Council tax Bill or struggle to pay the liability owing. There is likely to be a significant increase in Council Tax recovery action at reminder and summons stage with increased volumes of debts being referred to bailiffs if payments are not received.

## **6.0 Restructure of Brent Customer Services**

A review of the Brent Customer Services Structure was recently carried out, in preparation for the move to the Civic Centre and taking account of the many changes facing the unit in 2013/14. Consultation is due to end on 28 November and the new structure is planned to be in place by the end of December. The proposed structures will strengthen our arrangements for managing face to face contact, clarify arrangements for managing new functions such as the discretionary welfare assistance scheme, concessionary travel and align our service improvement team and Contact Centre teams closely so that operational plans and improvement plans become more integrated. The number of staff affected by the changes is 14 and there are sufficient post to place 13 of these post holders.

## **7.0 Financial Implications**

- 7.1 The changes implemented as part of the Future Customer Services project delivered savings of £697k in 2011/12, £1.573m in 2012/13, and £1.722m per annum from 2013/14.
- 7.2 Project costs of £657k were incurred in 2011/12 and a further £171k in 2012/13.
- 7.3 No allowance has been made for any costs arising from the agreed channel migration strategy as these are yet to be evaluated and agreed.

## **8.0 Legal Implications**

- 8.1 None.

## **9.0 Diversity Implications**

- 9.1 A predictive equality impact assessment was been carried out for the Future Customer Services project. This identified the need to carry out customer consultation in regard to issues relating to channel shift and our customers' propensity to increasingly move towards web enabled services. However, the previous and current project scope and plans do not remove access channels but are aimed at encouraging a change in customer behaviour towards increased web services. A retrospective impact assessment will be carried out in 2013, to review this after the first year of operations.

## **10.0 Staffing/Accommodation Implications**

- 10.1 A total of 45 FTE posts were deleted as a result of the FCS project (excluding the Housing Needs Transformation). The vast majority of these reductions were achieved without redundancy arising, through deletion of vacant posts, reductions to agency staff and realignment of displaced staff to new roles in the structure.
- 10.2 The proposed restructure of Brent Customer Services affects a relatively small number of staff with only one Manager post likely to result in redundancy.

### **Contact Officers**

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