



**One Council
Overview & Scrutiny Committee
25 January 2012**

**Report from
Director of Customer and
Community Engagement**

For Information

Report Title: Future Customer Services: Delivering change to the way Brent residents access services

1.0 Summary

1.1 This report explains plans to change customer service arrangements in Brent to drive up standards of service to residents. Society's attitudes towards standards of service delivery, quality and customer care are continuing to change in many ways. People are no longer prepared to be passive recipients of services, or settle for second best.

1.2 Brent was a leader in this field through the development of the One Stop Service. However, as a result of the fragmented nature of structures and processes, the council has not been able to keep up with developments that other councils have achieved in this area. The customer experience is therefore not as good as it could be and costs are higher than they need be.

1.3 The report:

- a. Sets out principles that drive improvements to customer services through One Council projects. These include:
 - i. better understanding of our customers so that services can be sensitive to personal needs;
 - ii. improved efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery to customers so that we better meet customer needs and reduce the call on council resources;
 - iii. 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;
 - iv. developing a shared customer offer with partners;
- b. Describes the main changes that are being introduced as part of the Future Customer Services project which will provide the basis for achieving the improvements needed;
- c. Outlines the culture and other changes needed to drive change in customer services in Brent.

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 Overview and Scrutiny Committee note and consider the contents of this report.

3.0 The principles driving change

3.1 Society's attitudes towards standards of service delivery, quality and customer care are continuing to change in many ways. Expectations are continuing to rise at an ever increasing pace. People are no longer prepared to be passive recipients of services, or settle for second best. They expect more control, more choice and high quality services which are value for money.

3.2 Each year many of our residents will contact the council at some point and in doing so the way they are treated, the standards of customer care and the quality of the outcomes they receive will influence their perception of the council as a whole.

3.3 This is why we have to drive up the standards of customer service we provide to residents. Whilst efficiency savings are a key objective of the One Council Programme, ensuring that we are delivering high quality services, developed around the needs of the customer and not the council, is also embedded in the approach we are taking.

3.4 Future Customer Services is about (a) introducing more efficient and effective ways of people contacting the council – through web, telephone, face to face or post; and (b) ensuring that this happens within an overall customer and channel strategy which determines priorities for improvement and ensures that resources are aligned to demand.

3.5 But the processes need to be in place to ensure that initial contact results in the customer's request for information being met or a service being provided. Historically, the One Stop Service signposted customers to services but was not responsible for ensuring resolution of the customer query or ensuring a service was provided. We have to move on from this approach which is costly and does not ensure customers gets what they want when they need it.

3.6 So services are only being transferred into the new Brent Customer Services environment when we are sure that processes and systems are in place to ensure resolution of the customer request. That is why work within Revenues and Benefits, Adult Social Care and BHP repairs and maintenance services aimed at addressing the whole customer journey is so important. Similar work is being carried out through the Housing Needs Transformation project – the front office arrangements for housing needs will only be transferred once the new processes and systems have bedded in. And as part of the Future Customer Services project, systems and processes in various Environmental and Neighbourhood Services and in the Chronically Sick and Disabled Team are being reviewed prior to transfer in to Brent Customer Services.

3.7 The principles underpinning our approach are set out in the following paragraphs.

Personalisation and customer empowerment

3.8 We need a better understanding of our customers and to plan and deliver our services in ways that make sense to them and through access channels – web, telephone, face to face – that are convenient for them and cost effective for the Council. This involves:

- a. Customer insight – sharing information we have on our customers in a timely and effective way to improve our understanding of their needs and aspirations;
- b. Customer journey mapping - tracking experiences that customers have as they encounter a service or set of services to reveal opportunities for improvement and innovation, acting as a strategic tool to ensure every interaction with our customers is as positive as it can be;
- c. Customer centric service delivery – moving away from a silo based provider approach designed around the council's structures to one more aligned to reflect our residents' and service users' own needs and circumstances. At its simplest, it means making sure that customers receive the information they require or access to the service they have requested without having to pass through several hoops. But it also means developing an integrated offer for customers where their broader needs are anticipated and met by understanding the cluster of services a person might need access to and ensuring the appropriate technological and cultural links to enable these to be delivered.

Efficiency and effectiveness

3.9 Improving efficiency and effectiveness is not only about enabling the council to live within its reduced resource base, but also recognises that customers' time is valuable. We need to:

- a. Maximise productivity of our staff – at the moment calls go unanswered at the same time as staff time is not fully utilised. There is the potential to use our Automatic Call Distribution and Workforce Management systems more effectively to ensure greater productivity, thereby reducing numbers of abandoned calls;
- b. Minimise avoidable contact – using our knowledge of when customers have to contact the council more than once because of failure to address the issue in the first instance. This allows us to address inefficiencies in services, systems and processes that gave rise to the failure and thereby increase resolution of issues at first point of contact;
- c. Achieve channel shift – giving people the opportunity to use web based services or telephone rather than having to visit our offices to get issues resolved. 68% of residents in Brent have access to the internet and 42% have a high propensity to use electronic forms of transaction but only 1% of the council's customer transactions are via the web.
- d. Renew our web - to achieve channel shift, there will need to be significant investment in our web. This will ensure people have access to the information they need via the web; but in order to get the full benefit of transactions on the web, there need to be proper links between the web and back office systems and a culture where resolving customer service needs is the fundamental objective of customer services.

Moving services to the front office

3.10 Whilst the council has had a long established One Stop Service, most of customer enquiries continue to go to individual services. By bringing together the majority of first contacts within the new Brent Customer Services division, it is possible both to ensure a consistently high quality of response and the on-going development of an effective cross-council approach to developing

more efficient and effective ways of delivering customer services. We need to:

- a. Transfer the customer facing aspects of services into the new Brent Customer Services division once we are satisfied that processes and systems are in place to ensure end-to-end service delivery;
- b. Have a council wide approach to web development, post-handling and telephone numbering;
- c. Reduce the plethora of separate face to face outlets the council has, so that where needed, customers know where to go to for issues to be resolved and they do not need to visit several buildings to access the specific services they need;
- d. Ensure all services use the council's Customer Relationship Management system to enable us to understand customer needs and contacts so that we can develop services accordingly.

Developing a shared offering with partners

3.11 The work on the various customer journey projects and the development of Future Customer Services has been about improving the offering by the council. From a resident's point of view, it is largely irrelevant which public service organisation provides the service and in many cases it is not clear to them who provides it. Brent has been good at working at a strategic level with partners but we have not been good at working with our partners to design services around customers. This is an area we will need to focus on in the future. Opportunities include:

- a. The Civic Centre and Willesden Green developments. Both of these will involve state of the art face to face facilities which provide opportunities to share with partners. Plans are already advanced for the Willesden Green front office to share facilities with Job Centre Plus in Harlesden during the decant period.
- b. Increased integration of Adult Social Care and health. The Adult Social Care customer journey project has already led to significant improvements in the way in which adult social care processes service requests, including much more effective first point of contact arrangements. The Integrating Health and Social Care project will allow us to build on this.
- c. The Tell Us Once project where we are working with the DWP and neighbouring boroughs (Harrow and Westminster) to ensure that information on births and deaths is shared with all relevant public services rather than individuals having to notify all agencies separately.
- d. Services which we already provide across borough boundaries, including registration and nationalities and trading standards.

4.0 Changes being implemented as part of the Future Customer Services project

4.1 Phase 1 of the Future Customer Services project, up to October 2012, will provide the foundations for the improvements needed to customer services in Brent. The changes put in place will allow:

- a. The development of a coherent cross-council strategy for Customer Services;
- b. The provision of clear and consistent customer access arrangements;

- c. Understanding of all customer demand and forecast changes;
- d. The flexible use of resources to meet customer demand.

4.2 The changes introduced as part of Phase 1 of the Future Customer Services project are as follows:

Creation of a new Brent Customer Services division in January 2012

4.3 Brent Customer Services has brought together the One Stop Service, Revenues and Benefits, and Pupil and Parent Support within Children and Families. It has responsibility for handling customer contact relating to benefits, council tax, adult social care, a range of Environment and Neighbourhoods services including streetcare and pest control, school admissions, the schools information service and general customer enquiries.

4.4 Further services are planned to transfer to Brent Customer Services over the next 15 months or are being reviewed to determine how customer contact can best support effective resolution of customer enquiries. These include:

- a. The children's information service which provides advice and information to parents and other agencies about child care and other services supporting families in Brent. This will transfer in April 2012.
- b. Environment and Neighbourhoods Services including licensing, permits, street lighting, transport (dropped kerbs etc), sports and cultural services enquiries. A review of customer service activities is ongoing and decisions about which services will transfer will be made by April 2012, with any services transferring in October 2012.
- c. Chronically sick and disabled team which deals with blue badges, freedom passes and the taxi card scheme. This will transfer by October 2012.
- d. Housing resource centre and Housing solutions customer contact which covers homelessness and housing applications. This will transfer by April 2013.

4.5 New services will only transfer into Brent Customer Services following a review of processes and systems to ensure that the new arrangements meet customer needs.

Consolidation of web functions within Brent Customer Services from January 2012

4.6 The transfer of these functions into Brent Customer Services enables the council to develop a strategy which manages customer contact with the council across all main access channels. Developments which will be part of this work include:

- a. targeted action to improve the council's on line offer using the council's current system, including a redesign of the web home page, ten new online forms and a new online booking system for services such as pest control and bulky waste collections. These will be in place by April 2012;
- b. an overhaul of web governance arrangements (content and design) to ensure buy-in across the council to decisions about the purpose of the web. A clear, focused purpose for the council's website will allow the development of a site which enables greater ease of use by customers and is integral to the vision of shifting service delivery, wherever possible, on to the web;

- c. developing a business case for replacing the council's current web infrastructure by February 2012 – a corporate decision will be required as to whether the council moves to a new content management system and a new 'online forms' solution. There is a need to redesign our current web pages to make these easier for customers to navigate and use and to increase customers' ability to transact with the council through the web where this is possible. The current content management system has limitations in its flexibility and thus may not support our aim to significantly increase customer self service through use of online information and forms. If the business case is agreed, it is envisaged that the redesign of our web content and implementation of the new system will be in place by December 2012.

Consolidation of post functions within Brent Customer Services by December 2012

- 4.7 A review of post functions will be completed by May 2012 with implementation by December 2012. The new centralised post function will form part of the new Brent Customer Services division and will operate from a central digital post room, following the move to the Civic Centre. This is linked to the various plans for preparing for the move to the Civic Centre and implementation of associated technology to support new ways of working. The central digital post team for the Civic Centre will receive all Council post, arrange for this to be scanned onto a document management system, and aim to deliver the majority of post electronically to desk tops across the Council.

The automation of telephony by January 2012 and streamlining of the council's published telephone numbers by October 2012

- 4.8 The automated switchboard went live for external users in January 2012 and should enable 80% of switch board calls to be automatically routed to the correct extension number. This will enable Brent Customer Services staff to focus on handling more complex customer enquiries and thus increase our capacity to handle these more efficiently and effectively. We are also configuring the automatic call distribution system to enable more effective telephone call routing. We will look to agree and implement a new telephone numbering strategy by October 2012. This will aim to reduce the number of published telephone numbers available to customers from approximately 140 at present to a more manageable number, with an aim to eventually reduce these to around ten.

Consolidation of face to face contact

- 4.9 There are currently three One Stop Shops – Brent House, Willesden Green, and the Town Hall – and a number of separate access points for specific services including housing reception at Mahatma Ghandi House, the education shop at Chesterfield House, Registration and Nationalities reception at the Town Hall and two parking shops. From 2014 there will be two main customer access points – the Civic Centre (from 2013) and the Willesden Green Centre (from 2014).
- 4.10 If possible we will aim to mirror the two customer centre approach, in advance of the opening of the Civic Centre, by reconfiguring our customer offer at the Town Hall to focus more on Registration and Nationality services and redirecting enquiries about other services to Brent House and Willesden. Interim arrangements are also being made to provide a temporary customer access point in the South of the Borough during the redevelopment of the

Willesden Green Centre. We are currently in discussions with Job Centre Plus and are hoping to create a shared access point at their Harlesden JCP location for the duration of the Willesden redevelopment. Harlesden JCP is located on the High Street and easily accessible for customers currently visiting Customer Services at Willesden Green.

5.0 Driving change in customer services

5.1 In order to deliver fundamental change in customer services in Brent, there will need to be a significant culture shift within the customer services environment and across other council services. Emphasis will need to be put on meeting customer needs, which means looking at the whole customer experience from the time they contact the council to the time their issue is resolved or service provided. Processes will be developed that ensure that there are as few unnecessary contacts as possible and that customer issues are resolved quickly and efficiently. There needs to be better use of available technology so that information is only collected once and requests for a service are automatically passed to the relevant service providers to action. There will need to be close co-ordination between people in customer services dealing with customers and the service areas that provide the services to ensure an effective end-to-end service. There will also need to be a much greater emphasis on performance management, ensuring that customers are dealt with quickly and efficiently so others are not kept waiting and also ensuring that peaks and troughs of work are dealt with effectively. The council has already implemented significant changes of this kind in Revenues and Benefits and Adult Social Care, which have delivered both financial savings and improved customer service. The approaches developed in these areas need to be rolled out to other areas.

5.2 There will also need to be changes in the way that customers see contact with the council working. Customers will be encouraged to use the web rather than contact the council through other means wherever this is appropriate. For this to happen though there will have to be a significant improvement in the quality and effectiveness of the council's web information and web transactions. The Future Customer Services project will develop a business case for a major upgrade of the web but the upgrade itself is outside the scope of the project. Without this upgrade, the scope for encouraging changes in customer behaviour will be limited and the ability to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of customer contact will be more limited than it otherwise would be.

6.0 Financial Implications

6.1 The changes implemented as part of the Future Customer Services project will deliver savings of £697k in 2011/12, £1.573m in 2012/13, and £1.722m per annum from 2013/14. In addition, savings from the related review of processes in Housing Needs service are expected to deliver savings of £950k in 2012/13 and £1.3m per annum from 2013/14.

6.2 Project costs are estimated at £657k in 2011/12 and a further £171k in 2012/13. Redundancy costs are currently being assessed based on redundancies identified as part of the setting up of the new Brent Customer Services division.

6.3 No allowance has been made for costs of a substantial upgrade of the web. The business case that is being developed for this will set out costs and potential benefits which will then be used as a basis for determining the improvements that will be made.

7.0 Legal Implications

7.1 None.

8.0 Diversity Implications

8.1 A predictive equality impact assessment has 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. We are carrying out consultation to develop the business case for developing the web, and expect the results to be available by the end of February 2012.

9.0 Staffing/Accommodation Implications

9.1 Total FTE posts that will be deleted as a result of the project are 45 (excluding the Housing Needs Transformation). The vast majority of these reductions have been achieved without redundancy arising, through deletion of vacant posts, reductions to agency staff and realignment of displaced staff to new roles in the structure. The first phase of the project which created the new Customer Services division, has resulted in voluntary redundancy of 3.5 posts and compulsory redundancy of 5 posts.

9.2 Staff within Children and Families who previously worked at Chesterfield House has now moved to Brent House. It is not intended that Chesterfield House will close as there are other services operating from there, including the Youth Service and Locality Teams.

9.3 Consideration is being given to a change in the use of the Town Hall with a view to expanding Registration and Nationality services delivered and redirecting enquiries about other services to Brent House and Willesden Green. This will reflect face to face arrangements from 2013 when the Civic Centre centre opens.

9.4 Work is also being carried out to an interim customer access point in the south of the borough during the redevelopment of Willesden Green and this is likely to be a shared customer access point at Harlesden Job Centre Plus.

Contact Officers

Toni McConville, Director of Customer and Community Engagement
Margaret Read, AD Corporate Customer Services