



Cabinet
13 November 2017

**Report from the Strategic Director
of Resources**

Wards affected:
ALL

Proposed remodelling of Brent Customer Services

1.0 Purpose of the Report

1.1 This report sets out details of proposals to remodel access arrangements for services provided by Brent Customer Services, following a pilot of revised arrangements which commenced in June 2017. The changes directly support achievement of the new Digital Strategy launched in July 2017 and build on work that has taken place over the last two years to make it easier for residents to access services and information through digital channels. The Digital strategy forms part of Brent's 2020 programme which aims to fundamentally reshape the nature of the Council's role and relationship with service users, whilst better managing future demand and supporting individuals to become more resilient.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Cabinet is recommended to consider and approve the proposed remodelling of services provided by Brent Customer Services as piloted from June 2017 and detailed in paragraphs 4.2 to 4.6. The revised service model includes:

- A move to an appointments only service for residents visiting the Customer Services Centre (CSC), with appointments only available for enquiries that cannot be resolved on line, except where the customer is identified as vulnerable and unable to use on-line facilities with assistance.
- A move to digital assistance for residents phoning Brent Customer Services except where the customer is identified as vulnerable and unable to use on-line facilities with assistance.
- Active promotion of digital channels with increased support available to customers who need assistance in using these, including assistance via webchat and floor walkers in the Customer Services Centre.

2.2 Subject to approval of recommendation 2.1 above, Cabinet is asked to note that the permanent shift to digital-based service delivery will become effective from December 2017 and the associated staffing and other arrangements will be managed between mid-November 2017 and April 2018.

3.0 Detail

Background

- 3.1 In July 2017, Brent launched a new Digital Strategy setting out its vision to become a Digital Council and for Brent to be a Digital Place. This strategy forms an important part of the delivery of the Brent 2020 strategy which aims to fundamentally reshape the nature of the Council's role and relationship with service users, whilst better managing future demand and supporting individuals to become more resilient.
- 3.2 One of the key objectives of the Digital Strategy is to make online access the first choice for customer interactions with all Council services. Work has been in progress since 2014 to improve Brent's online offer to residents, most significantly with the implementation of My Account in October 2015, which enables residents to view and manage their Council Tax, Housing Rent and Housing Benefit claim as well as enabling them to carry out transactions via online facilities without the need to visit or phone the Council. These are transactional services that generate high volumes of resident contact and in the case of Council Tax, touch every household in Brent.
- 3.3 Brent residents have already demonstrated an appetite for accessing Council services via digital channels with over 80,000 residents activating access through My Account representing 61% of households and just over 250,000 Council Tax and 326,000 Housing Benefit online interactions to date. These numbers are continuing to grow month on month. We are continuing to work to improve our Digital offer so that everyone who can or wants to transact online is able to do so easily, allowing us to better support those who are vulnerable and unable to do so.
- 3.4 As part of wider budget savings agreed for the Resources Department, Brent Customer Services has to deliver savings of £1m during 2017/18. The proposed remodelling of the service, which will accelerate channel shift, supports delivery of these savings and significantly mitigates any adverse impact these might otherwise have for the quality of services provided to residents. The proposed remodelling of the service has been piloted since June 2017 and the outcomes of this have been very positive, demonstrating that the revised service model can be implemented smoothly and successfully for residents.

4.0 Details of the proposed remodelling

- 4.1 There are circa 1,341 telephone calls received every day via Brent Customer Services by the Corporate Contact Centre, Benefits and Council Tax services. Additionally there are an average of 233 visitors to the Customer Services Centre whose enquiries are handled by a customer services officer as opposed to the use of self service facilities. Many of these contacts relate to enquiries or transactions that are available online and in the case of Benefits, have been generated because of a requirement to provide original documentation to validate Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support claims. Given the growth in online provision for banking, utilities and other services, the documentation required to validate Benefit claims is increasingly digital and thus we have reviewed our validation policy (known as risk based verification or RBV) and are no longer requiring original documentation. This means that Benefit customers do not need to visit the Customer Services Centre as they can scan or photograph their supporting information and send it electronically. Additional

checks have been put in place to validate information provided to support claims.

Changes to Customer Service Centre: face to face visitors

4.2 In view of the revised policy for Benefit verification, the comprehensive online facility available through My Account and the availability of self-service PC's for visitors in the Customer Services Centre, Brent Customer Services has been piloting a revised approach to handling face to face enquiries over the past 3 months. The pilot will continue until December, when subject to Cabinet approval, the revised service model will be permanently adopted. The key elements of this are:

- A move to an appointments only service except for defined emergencies such as imminent eviction;
- All enquiries to be triaged before appointments are offered and where an enquiry can be resolved online, the customer will be signposted to a self-service PC and provided with digital assistance as required;
- Where a customer is vulnerable and unable to use online facilities, an appointment will be offered with a customer services officer, usually on the same day and the enquiry will be resolved by the officer. Officers are provided with guidance to help identify those who may need more personalised help, but this is not prescriptive and officers will be trained and encouraged to use their judgement and discretion to support those who need most help;
- Additional digital floorwalkers will be made available to support increased use of self-service facilities;
- Self-service scanning facilities are being progressed and in the interim a document drop-off desk has been set up in the Customer Services Centre;

4.3 Evaluation of the pilot to date has shown a 51% reduction to the number of customers being seen by an officer and a corresponding increase in the use of self-service facilities. For those customers who needed to see an officer in order to resolve their enquiry, waiting times reduced from an average of 20 minutes to 11 minutes and a survey of visitors to the Customer Services Centre showed 95% were satisfied with the service they received.

Changes to arrangements for phone enquiries

4.4 Concurrent with the pilot in the Customer Services Centre, a revised approach has also been piloted in the Corporate Contact Centre and Benefits phone teams. The key elements of the proposed changes are:

- Interactive Voice recognition (IVR) messaging will be amended to promote the availability of self-service facilities including My Account and the Council's website. The messages will be relayed to callers whilst being held awaiting an officer to answer or when selecting a specific telephone option (e.g. reporting a missed bin).
- As with face to face contact, additional digital assistance will be made available to help residents use digital self-serve channels to resolve their enquiry. This will include increased resources available to handle

webchat enquiries; (webchat is available to customers using My Account facilities for Housing Benefit, Council Tax and Housing Rents). Enquiry handling will continue to be available for customers identified as vulnerable and unable to use self-service facilities. During the pilot, the vast majority of callers not requiring support were directed to the use of self-service facilities, enabling those who did require help to receive this in a responsive and timely way.

- 4.5 Evaluation of the pilot has shown a 22% reduction in calls to the Corporate Contact Centre with 88% of calls answered. Benefit phone demand also reduced by 21 % with circa 70% of calls answered. Average call waiting times remained stable for the Corporate Contact Centre at 1 minute 26 seconds but increased in relation to Benefit calls. Resources are now being reviewed to ensure that there is a more consistent performance across both contact teams. Additionally further actions are also in progress to reduce the volume of calls received by the Benefits team including implementation of a new online form for self-employed applicants and a new fast track assessment service that will encourage customers to submit all documentation required to support their claim and prevent the need for follow up contact. Feedback from customers is also being addressed including a review of the Councils' web site and shortening the length of IVR messages.
- 4.6 The results of the pilot have been very positive and have demonstrated that the online offer for Brent Customer Services is now sufficiently developed to enable a revised approach to enquiry handling to be adopted. This is why this report proposes that this revised approach be permanently implemented. This will necessitate changes to staffing arrangements within the unit in order to increase resources available to provide digital assistance as well as reducing overall costs to meet savings targets. It is anticipated that there will be a net reduction of about 25 posts within the unit arising from reorganisation although the precise details of this are still in development. Consultation for the proposed staffing changes will commence in mid to late November in accordance with the Managing Change policy, subject to Cabinet approval to adopt the revised service model.
- 4.7 Service quality has been evaluated both prior to and after the pilot and is subject to routine monitoring and evaluation as part of daily operational management with results being reported and reviewed on a monthly basis at the department's Service Management Board. Qualitative performance is measured using a combination of observation of interviews and appointments within the CSC and listening to "phone calls" conducted within the Corporate Contact Centre and Benefits Service. This helps to ensure that our Customer Promise is achieved and that any potential concerns identified are addressed in a positive and timely way.
- 4.8 The potential vulnerability of a customer is assessed by officers with specific reference to service guidelines. Additionally, officers are provided with guidance to help identify customers that may need more personalised assistance and are trained and encouraged to use their judgement and discretion to support those who need it most. Where vulnerability is determined, a "flag" and / or notepad entry, as appropriate, is recorded on the relevant software system used by the service concerned to ensure that the information is available for any other officer that may have future communications with the customer.

4.9 Subject to Cabinet approval, it is proposed that the change of service offer outlined within this report and the increased portfolio of online services available for customers to access will be publicised in partnership with the Digital Transformation Team helping to implement the Digital Strategy.

5.0 Financial Implications

5.1 Total savings of £1m have already been agreed for Brent Customer Services and the proposed remodelling of the service will facilitate the delivery of those savings, as planned, in 2018/19. The proposals, if agreed, will lead to one-off redundancy costs, which will be calculated when a revised operating model is agreed.

6.0 Legal Implications

6.1 The public sector equality duty, as set out in section 149 of the Equalities Act 2010, requires the Council, when exercising its functions, to have “due regard” to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited under the Act, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who have a “protected characteristic” and those who do not share that protected characteristic. The protected characteristics are: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

6.2 Having due regard involves the need to enquire into whether and how a proposed decision disproportionately affects people with a protected characteristic and the need to consider taking steps to meet the needs of persons who share a protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it. This includes removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by persons who share a protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic. For example, taking account of disabled persons’ disabilities and the action that could be taken to help a disabled person.

6.3 Due regard should also be had to the need to encourage those who have a protected characteristic to participate in public life. Having due regard to “fostering good relations” involves having due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding.

6.4 There is no prescribed manner in which the equality duty must be exercised, though producing an Equality Analysis is considered to be the most common and effective method. The Council must have an adequate evidence base for its decision making. This can be achieved by engagement with the public and/or service user groups and by analysing service user feedback and relevant data.

7.0 Diversity implications

7.1 In considering the proposed service changes for Brent Customer Services, an Equality Analysis (see Appendix A) has been undertaken to ensure that any adverse impact to residents who share a protected characteristic has been considered and mitigated where this is possible. The analysis has identified a potential adverse impact on some protected groups who may not be able to use online facilities such as older customers, customers with disabilities and

customers whose first language is not English. This impact has been mitigated by the measures taken to ensure that customers who are unable to use online facilities can continue to access services through existing face to face and phone arrangements and additional assistance as referred to in paragraph 4.2 of this report.

- 7.2 There are also positive outcomes arising for protected groups as improved online facilities enable customers with mobility issues to access services from home and those seeking help to use facilities can access this from any location.

8.0 Staffing and Accommodation Implications

- 8.1 Subject to Cabinet approval of the proposed service changes, staffing structures in BCS will be revised through the managing change policy to ensure that roles meet the needs of the new service model and savings targets are achieved. A separate Equality Analysis will be carried out to assess the potential / likely impact of the proposals on staff with protected characteristics.

Background Papers

Appendix A – Equality Analysis

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