

## READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

### REPORT BY DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

TO:	POLICY COMMITTEE		
DATE:	11 JULY 2022		
TITLE:	CUSTOMER EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME SIX MONTH UPDATE		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	CLLR TERRY	PORTFOLIO:	CORPORATE SERVICES AND RESOURCES
SERVICE:	CICS	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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#### 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The Council's [Customer Experience Strategy \(2020-2024\)](#) was adopted in January 2020. The Strategy sets out a vision to achieve the best possible experience for customers, whoever they are (residents, businesses, partners or suppliers) and whenever they deal with us. It also sets out our plan to achieve the vision by putting customers at the heart of everything we do as a Council, using innovative thinking, technology and data to achieve customer service excellence whilst also delivering savings to support the MTFS.
- 1.2 Ultimately, the Strategy will facilitate a culture and channel shift, by providing 24/7 online service, designed around the customer, whilst still providing support to those who need additional assistance.
- 1.3 To achieve this the Programme is focused on building a strong offer for online self-service, for the majority of simple transactions. For more complex queries, a multi-skilled central customer fulfilment team, equipped with the tools and information they need, will look to sign post and resolve queries at first point of contact. Only specialist queries will be transferred out to wider teams in the Council.
- 1.4 This model will result in fewer customer "hand offs" between teams and will reduce demand into the contact centre, improve the customer journey and allowing the realisation of financial benefits.
- 1.5 The purpose of this paper is to update Members on the progress of the Programme against the Strategy.

#### 2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That the Committee note progress against the Customer Experience Strategy and endorse delivery of the future work programme.

#### 3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 The Council's [Customer Experience Strategy \(2020-2024\)](#) was adopted in January 2020. The Strategy sets out a vision to achieve the best possible experience for customers, whoever they are (residents, businesses, partners or suppliers) and whenever they deal with us. It also sets out our plan to achieve the vision by putting customers at the heart

of everything we do as a Council, using innovative thinking, technology and data to achieve customer service excellence whilst also delivering savings to support the MTF5.

- 3.2 The programme is governed by the Customer Excellence Board, Chair and Sponsored by Frances Martin, Executive Director for Economic Growth and Neighbourhoods. This board will be stood down in 2022 and the Customer Excellence Programme will report to the newly formed Transformation and Efficiency Board, that will oversee and commission all transformation activity across the Council.

## 4. THE PROPOSAL

### 4.1 Key Activities over the past six months

#### 4.1.1 Website Improvements - *Missed Bins reporting, New Bin Ordering*, Bulky Waste booking

- 4.1.2 In March 2022, RBC launched new functionality to allow residents to report a missed bin online and immediately see why the bin was not collected. If no reason is recorded and the missed bin request is within specified timescales, the resident can submit a request for collection. The collection request is delivered directly to the relevant in-cab device for action, removing hand offs, internal contacts and potential resolution delay.

- 4.1.3 Over the last couple of months, the new process has been embedding. Before the change, residents could report a missed bin online, but the back-office work was manual rather than automated. Initial findings show the process is reducing pressure on back office staff with an overall reduction in missed bin reports going through to the service by 31% and a reduction of phone calls to the Customer Fulfilment Centre (CFC) by 47%. The customer journey has been greatly improved as highlighted by a recent customer compliment:

*“Reported online they had missed my food bin as I didn’t want food to be in it for another week before emptying. They came back within an hour of reporting THANKYOU brilliant service.”*

- 4.1.4 In April 2022, RBC launched a fully automated online process for new bin orders. Since go-live we have seen a 40% drop in email requests that required manual processing previously.

- 4.1.5 A project Team was brought together to deliver the new Bulky Waste Booking service following approval of the new policy. The booking functionality allows customers to automatically book both free and paid for bulky waste collections via an automated online service. The new functionality went live on time (May 31<sup>st</sup>) and around 90% of all available bookings have been filled. We continue to monitor the impact and benefits of this service, but it is expected to reduce calls coming in to the CFC and reduce back office administration, realising benefits for the Council.

### 4.2 Website Content Design

- 4.2.1 Following feedback from front line staff and residents, changes to improve navigation have been made to the RBC website homepage. These have included changing the design, so customers no longer need to ‘hover’ over tiles to see them and creating a new Council Tax tile on the homepage (previously Council Tax sat under Housing).

- 4.2.2 Work has also been completed to improve ‘wayfinding’ for customers. The focus has been on web pages that attract high volume such as [Council Tax](#) and [Parking Enforcement](#) pages on the website. Changes have included a new layout (which makes it easier to scan information on the page), updated content (with more accessible language for residents) and improved navigation through the pages. These changes have

made it easier for customers to self serve, increasing the number of people that can set up a direct debit or pay their council tax, or appeal / pay a parking fine.

### 4.3 **Robotic Process Automation (RPA)**

- 4.3.1 From December 2021 - January 2022, RBC successfully piloted our first RPA process. The pilot automated a simple but administrative heavy task for the Revenue and Benefits team - the automation of the indexing of correspondence from MS Outlook into Information@Work (I@W).
- 4.3.2 In the 12 months before the pilot, the Revenue and Benefits team indexed over 98,000 emails taking the equivalent of 230 working days. In the pilot period 4,174 emails were received and read by the RPA system, with 3,678 emails being successfully indexed into the I@W system. The 496 which did not work were due to business or system exceptions and were flagged to the team. Over a 12-month period, this would equate to a £12-19k efficiency for the team.
- 4.3.3 The pilot has evidenced that RPA would be an effective tool to drive efficiency across the Council. Based on the pilot a business case is now being developed to automate more processes within the Revs and Bens service, as well as identifying other areas of the Council this type of technology could be deployed.

### 4.4 **Culture**

- 4.4.1 In April 2022, [a customer experience module](#) for new starters was launched on learning pool. This short course, which is available to all staff, outlines our customer promise, who our customers are, their expectations and how we are working as a cross-council team to meet expectations. This module helps embed the “customer at the heart” philosophy which underpins the Customer Experience Strategy. The module is being rolled out to all frontline Customer Service Teams and is actively promoted on the Staff intranet for any staff to complete.
- 4.4.2 Other work in this area has included launching a new, clearer process for resident engagement in Council transformation initiatives. Work to date has included gathering information on different resident groups / forums and clarifying the engagement process. This is being embedded in core Project Management Office processes and methodologies for implementing change. Over the coming period we are looking to communicate and promote this work in the wider organisation.
- 4.4.3 Following the adoption of the **Accessible Information and Communication Strategy** by Policy Committee, an all staff briefing was held to launch the new Strategy. This briefing included hearing personal stories from residents at the Reading Deaf Centre about the challenges they can face engaging with the Council, as well as a high level roadmap of the changes being made. Work is now underway to ensure the strategy is adopted across the council and to ensure the roadmap of actions is delivered.
- 4.4.2 One of the key drivers for the Strategy was to ensure our website accessibility improved and that content, navigation and language were accessible to all. The improvements to date have seen our accessibility score increase from 83/100 to 97/100 (assessed by Site Improve).

### 4.5 **Service Reviews**

- 4.5.1 Service review activity has focused on opportunities to streamline customer facing reviewing within the Customer Fulfilment Centre (CFC) and Housing teams:

- A review in Customer Fulfilment identified 26 ranging from better use of contact centre technologies such as Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology and webchat, through to consolidating our change of address forms on the website. Opportunities have been categorised and fed into the pipeline for future delivery.
- A review of customer experience within housing has been taking place alongside the implementation of NEC Housing Software system. The review has covered 59 customer processes and identified nearly 100 opportunities for improved ways of working, these include reducing manual processing of data through automation of service request, ensuring letters and communications use accessible language and formats and enhanced My Account functionality so that customers can report and track housing repairs on line and making it easier to make payments. Many of these opportunities cut across services areas for example a payment customer journey may start in the CFC, get fulfilled by the Housing Team, and closed by the finance team.

## **5 Programme plan for 2022/23**

### **5.1 Case and Customer Management procurement**

- 5.1.1 RBC have launched a procurement for a new customer and case management solution(s). The procurement is set to run through until the Autumn and will involve representatives from across the organisation in the selection process.
- 5.1.2 An implementation phase of 12-24 months will follow the procurement; resulting in an embedded system which supports the realisation of the Customer Experience Strategy through better data management, providing an integrated customer portal and reduce the number back-office processing time due double keying etc.

### **5.2 Bookings**

- 5.2.1 A programme of work to allow customers to book and pay on line for a range of Council facilities including hiring of rooms and event spaces, Reading Play services - minigolf and ropes will go live over the next couple of months

### **5.3 Customer Fulfilment restructure**

- 5.3.1 With a number of service reviews carried out in Parking permit and enforcement Team, Planning Support Team, Building Control, Facilities Management support and Lettings now completed, and work concluding on identifying enhanced ways of working in the CFC team, the staffing structure is being reviewed to deliver the model agreed in the Customer Experience Strategy. This is phase one of the restructure as the expectation would be to move more services and process into the CFC over two years. The teams involved in phase one are:

- Customer Fulfilment team
- Parking Permits and Enforcement team
- the Lettings and FM Support team (within CFC)
- Public Protection Business Support
- Planning Technical Support
- Building Control
- Family Information Service

- 5.3.2 The restructure will adopt the organisational design principles that set out best practice guidance on issues such as the number of direct reports for managers, bringing like with

like processes and services together and providing clear career pathways for staff. The restructure will contribute to the overall financial savings of the Customer Experience Strategy, however no compulsory redundancies will be required to deliver savings, as these can be achieved through removal of existing vacancies across the teams, as new digital capabilities are introduced.

- 5.3.3 The proposed restructure looks to create a comprehensive Customer Fulfilment Centre, building on the great work done by the team and building resilience and cross-service learning into the team. A number of engagement sessions are being held with all teams ahead of moving into formal consultation, to provide staff with a forum to contribute to the early designs of the structures and raise any considerations and issues that can be addressed within the consultation report.

#### **5.4 Customer Fulfilment - Right First Time**

- 5.4.1 The Customer fulfilment service review has identified a series of service improvements such as:

- The review and redesign our telephony (IVR - Interactive Voice Response) system which will allow more customers to get to the right place on the first attempt.
- The implementation of a live/searchable knowledge database will reduce training time; empower frontline customer fulfilment colleagues to provide customers with the most current information quickly and reduce call duration, thereby creating a more efficient service. And will ensure consistent quality and standards across the teams.
- Pilot for Web Chat and improved notifications and reminders through My Account
- Revs and Bens enquiries and website review to enable customers to self serve, reduce backlogs, and reduce calls into the CFC.

#### **5.5 Digital Permits and TROs**

- 5.5.1 The Digital Parking Permits work is aiming to pilot a digital parking permit system for Residents and Visitor parking permits within the chosen area of Lower Caversham - Zone 02R. The pilot aims to prove the benefits of moving to digital permits, through enhancing customer experience (more flexible, easier to navigate customer journey that meets resident expectations), and reducing costs of printing and postage. The pilot is anticipated to start in October 2022, following the statutory consultation period and final approval from Traffic Management Sub Committee (TMSC) in September 2022. Following the pilot a report of the findings and proposed way forward will be presented to TMSC.

- 5.5.2 Linked to the above, work is about to start on progressing the procurement of new traffic regulation order (TRO) software. At present, TROs are held in PDF format, and are difficult to search and access for internal teams. The procurement of this software will be transformative for the service, realising back-office efficiencies and enhanced services for customers.

### **6. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS**

- 6.1 The Customer Experience Strategy is an underpinning programme of activity to support the Councils Corporate Plan.

- 6.2 Specifically the Strategy contributes to creating an accessible, efficient Council with the Customer at the heart of our service design. These objectives contribute to the key themes of

### **Thriving Communities**

- Ensuring access to information and our service is made simple and considers all customers needs when interacting with the Council, either through accessible content on our website to providing face to face services that cater for the digitally excluded or customers with additional needs.

6.3 The Programme also contributes to the Council achieving the Medium Term Financial Strategy. See section 10.

6.4 Full details of the Council's [Corporate Plan](#) are available on the website and include information on the projects which will deliver these priorities.

## **7. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 *None*

## **8. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION**

8.1 The Programme is underpinned by the Inclusive Information and Communication Strategy adopted by Policy Committee in [September 2021](#).

8.2 Throughout the Programme changes to processes and the website are done in consultation with user groups, to allow for feedback and continuous improvement.

## **9. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

9.1 *Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to—*

- *eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;*
- *advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;*
- *foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.*

9.2 An equality impact has been completed for the overarching strategy. The strategy is designed to be inclusive and recognises that not all customers are able to self serve.

9.3 Where customers need additional support or resources to interact with the council the strategy aims to create the capacity within the organisation to effectively respond to these needs, by joining up and simplifying the customer journey. Bringing together our multiple customer service teams into one, highly-skilled Customer Fulfilment Team, will mean frontline staff will be equipped to deal with a range of issues, by extending and expanding the scope of the current customer service offer and ensuring our 'technical experts and specialist' staff are focussed on delivering complex services.

9.4 We have an annual subscription service with the Shaw Trust to ensure digital accessibility remains front and centre of the strategy to ensure everyone, regardless of their skills, abilities or disabilities, can access information, technology, products and services, often using assistive technology. The Shaw Trust digital testing team will provide technical support and consultancy in this area and will monitor our online service on a monthly basis to ensure we maintain accessibility as we expand and refine our digital offer.

9.5 For those customers that are not able to use online services there are processes in place to provide assistance to these customers. This includes; face to face support at our Customer Hub at the Civic Centre, 9-5 telephone support; self-service computers

available at the civic centre and libraries across the borough and Communicare, a local advice agency provide practical support to help people complete on-line forms.

## 10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 None

## 11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The Programme has an overall savings target of £986,000 between 2021 and 2025. The savings profile is shown in the table below. To date £154,000 has been saved, and the programme has currently identified 79% of the total saving for year 22/23.

	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24	24/25	TOTAL
<b>Target</b>	<b>£66,000</b>	<b>£88,000</b>	<b>£207,000</b>	<b>£312,000</b>	<b>£313,000</b>	<b>£986,000</b>

11.2 The table below shows estimated savings for in flight initiatives. Estimated Programme savings are both cashable and efficiency savings. Additionally, there is a list of opportunities identified through service reviews to be quantified and brought into the programme of work.

Initiative	Estimated Saving	Estimated realisation	Comments
Missed Bins / New Bin Orders	£28k	22/23	Estimation based on number of calls received 21/22 - figures and impact need confirming once change has embedded
Bulky Waste Booking Form	£9k	22/23	Reduced demand to CFC. Non-cashable back-office efficiencies also expected.
Facilities Management Booking Form	£27k	22/23	Vacancy already held for this saving, estimated reduction demand.
CFC Right First time and Restructure	£100k	22/23	Reduced demand and improved telephony. Restructure to create new reduce management lines
Revs and Beds Automation	£120k	23/24	Saving through time reduction in processing. Any FTE freed up will be directed to additional value add activity such as improved debt recovery or collection rates
Digital Permits and TROs	£35k	23/24	Reduction in post and printing costs. This can not be realised until digital permits are fully rolled out.  Work will also facilitate the £56-79k saving already realised in the service, which has left the team over capacity.
Case and Customer Management	£200-500k	2023 to 2025	Back-office efficiencies and reduced demand. This number will need validating once a solution has been selected.
<b>TOTAL Lower Estimate</b>	<b>£519,000</b>		

## 12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1 None