

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD
Havering Town Hall, Main Road, Romford
30 July 2024 (7.00 - 9.05 pm)**

Present:

COUNCILLORS

Conservative Group	Keith Prince, Timothy Ryan and David Taylor
Havering Residents' Group	Philippa Crowder, Laurance Garrard (Chairman), David Godwin, Bryan Vincent and Julie Wilkes
Labour Group	Keith Darvill
East Havering Residents' Group	Martin Goode
Residents' Association Independent Group	Philip Ruck

The Chairman reminded Members of the action to be taken in an emergency.

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Councillor Mandy Anderson, Councillor Keith Darvill substituting.

2 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interest.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 May 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

4 CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY UPDATE

The Director of Customer Services explained the strategy was designed to allow the Council to deliver excellent customer service and engagement. Residents would be treated as customers with staff being polite, professional and respectful as well as open to feedback.

The strategy aimed to embed a customer-centric culture, modernise service delivery and improve the customer experience. Good customer service covered areas including how people felt when interacting with the Council, how easy it was to contact the Council and whether people received the outcome they desired. The strategy would encompass the development of new customer service standards for both on-line and telephone contact.

The Council would be transparent about publishing performance and understanding what residents think about the Council. A new resident panel would be set up to improve communication and the Council's website would be kept up to date with the latest information in order to encourage on-line reporting.

Digital exclusion would also be considered with phone access via the contact centre continuing to be provided as well as face to face channels such as the contact centre.

The strategy had been approved by Cabinet in July and would be fully published in early September. Members were asked to consider how they wished to be kept informed of progress in this area.

A Member felt that the targets within the strategy were unrealistic and should be more achievable. The Director of Customer Services responded that targets should be realistic but stretching. Average call waiting times had been reduced from five to two minutes and this showed that targets could be delivered. In terms of on-line take-up, there had been around 25,000 renewals of the garden waste service this year with 70% of these being booked on-line and a further 16% using the automated phonenumber. It was hoped to reach 80-85% online transactions for all key services. It was accepted that staffing levels may reduce as more services went on-line.

The Director of Customer Services would lead a collaborative effort across the Council and it was aimed to use existing resources where possible. Now the overall strategy had been adopted, more detailed delivery plans could be developed.

It was suggested that Councillors were a useful source of knowledge of resident experience with using services and that this could be fed back to officers. It was clarified that the contact centre was open 9 am – 5 pm and an out of hours line was also in operation. On-line service requests could be made 24:7 and staff were a mixture of home and office based. A Member felt that staff should be in the office more and it was clarified that staff rotas were moving from one day in the office per month to one day per week.

Oversight of call handling was carried out using example call lists and the Council was looking at a possible corporate telephony solution in the future. It was agreed that the Council's Casetracker system could be demonstrated to Councillors. The system could distinguish between Councillors and the general public and hence a report line could be established to ward Councillors of issues in their ward. The Strategic Director of Resources

added that the process for flagging urgent issues had been recently reviewed and more details would be given in due course.

It was accepted that Council signage was part of the wider customer experience and that this could be included in the strategy. The consistency of written communications would also be reviewed. As hard copy stocks ran down, documents for each service would be reviewed. Guidance to staff on the correct corporate tone of voice would also be produced. Electronic newsletters would be produced more frequently in order to more widely disseminate the ways in which people could contact the Council. The cost of producing the newsletters would be confirmed with communications.

A Member felt that examples of poor customer service and steps taken to improve could be brought to the Board for scrutiny. The Director of Customer Services would investigate what anonymised learning could be shared. Concerns were raised about difficulties in setting up a Residents' Panel but the Director did not envisage major difficulties in recruiting to this. The Panel would reflect the demographic make-up of the wider population.

There were no current plans to extend the opening hours of the contact centre due to the cost of doing so. The order of menu options when residents phoned the contact centre could be varied with for example adult social care being the first option to contact via the menu. This could be tested with residents.

The key risks to delivery of the strategy included the level of additional funding needed, the need to encourage the whole of the organisation to support the agenda and any unexpected factors. It was confirmed that satisfaction levels of users of Council services provided by third parties were also being captured and work would be undertaken to promote the same customer service agenda in third party contractor standards.

The Strategic Director of Resources stated that she recognised that customer service was a major priority for Members. All requests for investment would be considered in light of the Council's financial challenges. The need to improve customer service was recognised however and the Chief Executive confirmed that customer service remained a priority of the Administration. It was also emphasised that the strategy was designed to be delivered primarily within existing resources.

It was agreed that an update on progress with the strategy should be given to the Board on a six-monthly basis and that this should include external benchmarking.

The Board:

Noted for information the contents of the new Customer Service Strategy and agreed a schedule for updates on progress as outlined above.

5 **TARGET OPERATING MODEL**

The Council's Chief Executive advised the Board that the senior management structure had recently been reviewed. This and other projects such as the movement of services in the new structure and HR alignments had been delivered within the Target Operating Model.

Work was in progress to change organisational culture with for example actions to improve staff behaviour with residents. Staff turnover had reduced from 12.5% to 9.3%. Lessons learned from the Target Operating Model process had included the importance of communications and engagement with staff and of investing time in planning the process.

Benefits of the Model had been seen in areas such as debt collection where this was now conducted in a more corporate way across the Council as a whole. The overall restructure process had gone fairly smoothly and former Onesource services such as HR and asset management had now been fully integrated back into the Council. This would also apply for legal services by the end of 2024.

The Council's debt board aimed to help residents avoid getting into arrears but would also assist with the Council's financial position. Debt collection rates were good for business rates and rent but had slipped slightly for Council Tax. Council Tax collection rates remained above 90% (96.2%). The slight fall in collection was due to changing demographics and Havering now having a more transient population. The overall debt level of residents was considered by the Council.

It was accepted that the report used too many acronyms. It was clarified that the review of meetings across the Council related to internal management meetings rather than Member meetings.

The Chief Executive accepted that there were not enough staff to do everything that he wished but the Council did not have the resources to employ further staff. It was accepted that staff were now under more strain.

The Board noted that the structure had been implemented in its thematic format delivering the ongoing benefits of collaboration and integration that will support the success of the Target Operating Model and create the capability and capacity within the Council's challenging financial circumstances to best deliver its corporate plan.

6 **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY RULES: EXCEPTIONS TO THE CALL-IN (REQUISITION) PROCEDURE**

A report of the Monitoring Officer detailed Key Decisions that had been taken in the circumstances set out in Rule 18 (exemption to the call-in (requisition) procedure) for the six month period covering 1st November 2023 to 31st May 2024.

The decisions where exemptions to call-in had been agreed by the Chairman were as follows:

1. Tithe Barn National Highways Company Funding Application
2. Delivering Better Value Programme Grant Acceptance and Delivery Approval
3. To enter into the Mayor's Care & Support Fund Contract with the Greater London Authority to support the development of the Mawney Close and Mowbrays Close developments

Reasons for the granting of exemptions to call-in were detailed in the report.

The Board noted the report.

Chairman