

To: Cabinet
Date: 12 February 2020
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Customer Experience Strategy

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Customer Experience Strategy
Key decision:	No
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Safer Communities and Customer Focused Services
Corporate Priority:	An Efficient and Effective Council
Policy Framework:	Corporate Plan 2016-2020
Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report.	

Appendices
None

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 04 February 2020, the Scrutiny Committee considered a report concerning the proposed Customer Experience Strategy and Action Plan 2019 - 22.
2. The Panel would like to thank Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Safer Communities and Customer Focused Services, for presenting the report and answering questions. The Committee would also like to thank Helen Bishop,

Head of Business Improvement, for compiling the report and supporting the meeting.

Summary and recommendation

3. Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Safer Communities and Customer Focussed Services, introduced the report. People increasingly expected higher standards of customer engagement in both the public and private sector. The proposals in this report would contribute to meeting that expectation. Customer feedback showed that face to face engagement with Council staff was rated very highly. Digital engagement, however, was rated very poorly by comparison. The proposals sought to address that weakness in particular. The enhanced digital offer would not replace but run in parallel with existing services. Digital services were, generally, more economical to provide than face to face, and in encouraging people to adopt this means of engagement through better provision resources would be available to support the needs of those whose needs were unsuited to online channels of engagement. The Council continued to invest in significant improvements to the technological infrastructure, necessary to support the strategy. The Strategy was complemented by a robust action plan.
4. Helen Bishop, Head of Business Improvement, drew attention to the considerable consultation which had contributed to the development of the strategy, as outlined in the report.
5. In response to the report presented the Committee focused its questions along a number of key themes:
 - The diversity of the Council's customers
 - Opportunities for wider engagement
 - Maintaining person-centredness within a technologically driven stream of work
6. The Committee makes five recommendations.

Customer Diversity

7. One area on which the Committee sought further information was on who the strategy's outputs were intended to impact; who is the customer? The Council engages with residents and visitors in multiple ways and on multiple levels, from participation at Council meetings and committees, to grant recipients to people seeking to register to pay their council tax. Indeed, it is possible that the same individual can engage with the Council under a multiple customer guises; a Council tenant paying rent, invoicing the Council as a small business provider and writing to their ward members to complain about litter would have three different engagements with three different areas of the Council, via three

different methods of communication, and may well have three different experiences in the same day.

8. The Committee noted the high level of satisfaction reported in feedback from face to face and telephone interactions with the Council (98% and 92% respectively). However, on the basis of the multiple opportunities for different types of engagement with the Council it was suggested that within the overall high quality of service provided there was nevertheless the opportunity for pockets of less positive service to be overlooked without greater granularity of customer satisfaction data. Anecdotal comments suggested that the Council's service to business customers may not be as high as to individuals, but due to numerical imbalance between the two groups it would not be possible to tell from the overall levels of satisfaction.
9. It is recognised that the Council's strategy to improve its digital offer, particularly its website, will be of benefit to all customers. However, it is also felt that identifying the variety of areas of engagement, the different outcomes that customers of each type want, and targeting particular dissatisfaction hotspots is an area of work which should also be undertaken in parallel.

Recommendation 1: That the Council gives consideration to the variety of customer-groups the Council engages with, their specific needs and desired outcomes from their engagement, and the Council's current performance in delivering those outcomes in the delivery and prioritisation of work within this strategy.

10. In response to questioning over what the KPIs of the Customer Experience Strategy were, it was reported that the key indicators for success would be through ensuring the realisation of the savings enabled by greater digital engagement, increased customer satisfaction with the website and overall, and a greater proportion of people using the website.
11. It was recognised by the Committee that the Council now has, via its wholly-owned companies, a further cohort of customers at one remove. Aside from the benefits of cost-reduction and customer-service improvement anticipated by the Council in its exercise, as trading entities within competitive market places (particularly for Oxford Direct Services), improved customer experience would be anticipated to ensure repeat business, supporting profits and ultimately contributing to the Council's services through dividend payments. As such, a similar exercise to ensure the Council's companies realise the benefits of improving customer experience and efficiency of customer management is encouraged.

Recommendation 2: That the Council as shareholder ensures that a similar customer experience and service improvement exercise is undertaken in its wholly-owned companies, particularly Oxford Direct Services.

Wider Engagement

12. The Committee considered the number of annual interactions by the Council and presented within the report – 6.42m unique web visits, 1.87m individual page views, 209,000 telephone calls and 28,000 face to face visits. These numbers were considered specifically in light of the number of people attending Council or committee meetings, engaging in consultations, or service design.
13. It was suggested that the numbers show that there exists a very significant pool of people engaged with the Council in a transactional way, but the numbers tail off to very little between transacting with the Council and engaging with it in its ongoing democratic function.
14. With intelligent targeting, asking customers at the time of engagement to feed back their views on other issues, it was suggested that it may be possible to translate the willingness of residents to engage in one way to engaging in another. Successful translation of even a small proportion of those people engaging with the Council as customers could have a transformative impact on the level of democratic engagement and communication with its citizens. In light of this opportunity, therefore, it is felt that future iterations of the strategy should seek to include consideration of ways in which transactional engagements can be translated into increased democratic engagement.

Recommendation 3: That in future iterations of the strategy, the Council looks at future opportunities to increase democratic engagement.

15. Whilst naturally raising questions about the way the Council engages with those in the City, it was recognised by the Committee that the Customer Experience Strategy is a strategy with a specific remit of cost-reduction and customer service improvement. It would be unreasonable to expect that it could address the multiplicity of issues relating to the way the Council engages its citizens.
16. It is felt, however, that whilst the Council has shown innovation and commitment to engaging with those it seeks to serve, for example the establishment of the Lived Experience Advisory Forum for homelessness prevention and holding the first Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change in the country, it should strive to build on what it has achieved. The complexity of doing so, with the number of people engaging with the Council in such a number of ways, means that a corporate-level response is required, and a strategy is required to scope and inform that response.

Recommendation 4: That the Council develops a citizen engagement strategy to raise the level of engagement across all elements of its interface with the public.

Retaining People-Centredness

17. An area of particular discussion concerned the flip side of the Council's ambition to encourage people to move to cheaper, digital means of engagement: freeing up resources to support those for whom digital engagement is not suitable. An underlying thread of the discussion was the importance of ensuring that, in a largely technology-driven strategy, the second, human element not be overlooked.
18. Discussion was held over the variety of reasons why digital engagement with the Council might not be the most appropriate form in their circumstances. Age, disability and language were referenced as reasons for some people. However, it was noted that a more important determinant of suitability for digital engagement was its level of simplicity or routineness. Routine transactions, such as the payment of council tax, were identified to be positive areas for digitisation and automation. An intractable and complex benefits query involving multiple parties required human input and could not be handled well even via e mail. Interestingly, this was reported to be borne out by the preference of customers themselves; analysis of the types of transactions dealt with over the phone and face to face in the contact centre shows the more complex issues are dealt with face to face and more routine one undertaken over the phone.
19. In light of the recognition that improved digital provision could not be the exclusive response to the challenge of improving customer experience, the Committee was pleased to hear that the Council is already helping to provide services for people for whom digital services are less appropriate. For example, in Blackbird Leys officers were being empowered with the technology and access to information to provide a one-stop shop service, allowing cross-service problems to be resolved by one individual.
20. It was suggested that the fact that reference to these important person-centred practices and holistic approaches to managing customer problems were not made within the substantive Cabinet report was an illustration of the potential danger that exists if improved non-digital provision is not constantly reinforced as a core element within the digitally-focused strategy.
21. A specific recommendation was made in relation to the Home Improvement Agency, that work be undertaken to ensure there is greater awareness of the service amongst non-Council professionals. There is currently a particular opportunity for this to be implemented effectively with GP groups within Oxford forming five Primary Care Networks, each appointing a social prescribing link coordinator. The role of the social prescribing link coordinator is to collate and disseminate information on and social prescribing and increase its uptake. It is possible that once the social prescribing link coordinators are in post there will be opportunities and fora which bring together link coordinators and social prescribing providers, creating further opportunity for awareness raising and joint-working.

Recommendation 5: That the Council engages with GP surgeries through their social prescriber link coordinator and any other social prescriber fora to promote the availability of the HIA and other relevant services.

Further Consideration

22. It is anticipated that there will be continued interest in the work and wider issues that the Customer Experience Strategy touches on. The likely opportunities for further consideration will be, should Council decide to adopt one, at the draft of Citizen Engagement Strategy, as well as possibly in a year's time when the impacts and trends arising from the Customer Experience Strategy will be more apparent. However, neither option has been agreed to by the Committee.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee made on 04/02/2020 concerning the Customer Experience Strategy and Action Plan report

Response provided by Cabinet Member for Safer Communities and Customer Focused Services, Councillor Nigel Chapman

13

<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>Agree?</i>	<i>Comment</i>
1) That the Council gives consideration to the variety of customer-groups the Council engages with, their specific needs and desired outcomes from their engagement, and the Council’s current performance in delivering those outcomes in the delivery and prioritisation of work within this strategy.	Yes	
2) That the Council as shareholder ensures that a similar customer experience and service improvement exercise is undertaken in its wholly-owned companies, particularly Oxford Direct Services.	Yes	ODS is undertaking a review of the commercial customer experience, focusing on how we measure and improve customer satisfaction, how we identify and manage new customer expectation, and how we capture customer value beyond the obvious financial transactions. This will be reported back to the ODS Board and Shareholder in the coming months
3) That in future iterations of the strategy, the Council looks at future opportunities to increase democratic engagement.	Yes	
4) That the Council develops a citizen engagement strategy to raise the level of engagement across all elements of its interface with the public.	Partial	The Council did previously have a Community Engagement Policy which expired in 2017. Scrutiny has requested a paper on “Public participation in decision making and citizen involvement” for their April 2020 meeting: ‘To consider how the public could be better engaged with council decision making, such as through public meetings, consultations and other public forums, for example’. The Council is in agreement with the broad

Date of Cabinet Meeting: 12.02.20

		recommendation, but considers that more targeted recommendations and responses may be made following Scrutiny's report on Citizen Engagement in April and suggests a delay until after this report has been presented may be a more effective way of sequencing this work..
5) That the Council engages with GP surgeries through their social prescriber link coordinator and any other social prescriber fora to promote the availability of the HIA and other relevant services.	Yes	<p>The Council is already undertaking this, specifically through participating in</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Health work streams such as the Health Improvement Board Sub groups, and working with Locality Officers, Prevention Champions, and all of the Physical activity work programm and are currently giving consideration to how we use these links to support the development and prioritisation of services within our priority areas. 2. The primary care network working group, which includes the newly appointed social prescribers and will involve attending the social prescribing Workshop with all the new social prescriber staff lead by Public Health