

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET 27 February 2024

Draft Customer Experience Strategy Report of Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Agree to delegate to the Cabinet member for Community and Corporate Services to respond to the recommendations contained in the body of this report on behalf of the Cabinet, and
 - b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. The Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the Council's Draft Customer Experience Strategy at its meeting on 19 January 2024.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Neil Fawcett, Cabinet portfolio holder for Community and Corporate Services, Mark Haynes, Director of Customer and Culture, Emily Schofield, Head of Strategy, Clare Martin, Quality and Performance Manager, and Susmita Dave, National Graduate Trainee, for their work in preparing and/or introducing the and answering questions.

SUMMARY

5. Cllr Fawcett introduced the draft strategy as the Council's means to level up the approach to customer service when interacting with residents via the Council's many services across the county. It intended to learn from and build on those areas providing good service in order to drive improvements and provide a consistently good level of service across the entire Council. An area of particular strength was the level of satisfaction recorded by those using the Customer Service Centre. Less successful with the public was the Council's Fix My Street platform. Investment in the training and development of staff would be key.
6. Susmita Dave, National Management Trainee, provided further detail. The draft strategy was intended to be run over a three year period with the express vision of 'put[ting] the customer at the heart of our service delivery'. The need for such a strategy was driven by multiple factors. New groups of people were interacting with the Council owing to technological development, which had also raised expectations of how frictionless interactions with an organisation should be; there was a need to assure customers that standards of service existed; more positive interactions with the public would underpin the morale of staff. Feedback from the Residents' Survey, budget consultation and other sources indicated that in some areas trust with residents had been dented. Tackling this successfully would rely both on political support and officer prioritisation.
7. The Strategy sought to use national data, resident survey information and mapping of customer data, profiles and interactions against customer service levels to focus on making the greatest difference.
8. The four key pillars of the Strategy focused on the following: 1) Embedding a customer ethos within the Council's culture 2) Developing a better understanding of the Council's customers and what they want, 3) Optimising access to customer services, particularly through new technology, whilst protecting the access of those for whom such technology would prove a barrier, and 4) Designing an excellent end to end customer experience so that more complex cases - drawing on input from multiple areas of the Council - could receive the same high standard of service as simpler interactions.
9. An important element of the Strategy was that it should be flexible to respond to new data. The Council intended to encourage feedback from its staff, service users as well as continuing to reference and engage with information gleaned from local and national data-sets.
10. The overwhelming majority of issues discussed by the Committee in response to the presentation have resulted in its six recommendations, which are detailed below and relate to the language the Council uses to describe those it is trying to serve by this strategy, areas of public misperception and unrealistic expectation, and extensions to the focus proposed draft.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Use of Language

11. The question of how the Council refers to those people it delivers services for is actually a very complex one; indeed, this report does not take a consistent position. This is largely because of the sheer variety of services the Council provides, making a single, accurate umbrella term elusive. For instance, road maintenance is provided universally and without charge. Such users have a very different relationship with the Council than, say, a specific couple opting to get married in a Council registry office. This relationship is, in turn, is very different to the relationship the Council has with, for example, academies for whom it provides services on a commercial basis.
12. Notwithstanding the above, the Committee is wary of using 'customer' as the primary means to describe those for whom the Council provides services. 'Customer' implies a commercial relationship when actually the bulk of the Council's resources are devoted to delivering public services which are paid for through taxation. This point of difference is one which the Committee values but is diminished by using a descriptor which inaccurately implies that the Council's relationship with its residents is primarily commercial. The wrong tone is set.
13. As referenced, the Committee recognises that finding an accurate short-hand for the variety of the Council's interactions is very difficult and it does not have any easy solutions to propose. However, it hopes that the Cabinet will note the level of concern at the consequences of the current proposals, and finds a way to refer to service-users which is accurate and reinforces the Council's values.

Recommendation 1: That the Council reviews within the Customer Experience Strategy - and more widely - its use of the word 'customers' as the preferred term to refer to those in receipt of collectively paid-for public services.

Public Perception and Understanding

14. A crucial influence on the experience of residents in their interactions with the Council are their initial expectations, which are based on their perceptions and understanding. The Committee identifies three areas where public understanding is at variance with the reality and may cause friction: the constraints of the Council's financial situation, the scope of the Council's responsibilities vis a vis other public bodies, and who actually works for the Council.
15. The issues that are brought up below are too wide-ranging for the Committee to give detailed recommendations on, but rather it is necessary to flag areas which it feels would benefit the outcomes of the strategy if given greater focus.

16. One of the most valuable consultations the Council undertakes is the Residents' Survey and this backs up the Committee's view that the public do not fully comprehend the degree of financial pressure the Council is under, and the degree to which much of its spending is non-discretionary. For example, the table below, taken from the Residents' Survey, shows public support for efficiency measures within the Council but far reduced support (and even opposition) to measures which increase cost to the public or reduce service levels.

APPROACH <i>(base totals shown after each)</i>	% disagree	% agree	Net % agreement
Generate additional income by maximising the use of buildings and land the council owns (our assets) (1,096)	3%	86%	+83%
Reduce costs by using digital technology to deliver services more efficiently (1,093)	9%	73%	+65%
Reduce the costs of the contracts we use to provide services (1,093)	9%	64%	+55%
Reduce staffing costs by redesigning services, using fewer agency staff and/or holding vacancies (1,091)	15%	61%	+47%
Reduce spending on services the council is not legally required to provide (1,089)	21%	43%	+22%
Use the council's financial reserves (money set aside for unexpected events), to provide one-off funding (1,095)	23%	42%	+20%
Generate additional income from sales, fees, and charges (1,074)	26%	42%	+16%
Generate additional income by increasing council tax (1,095)	59%	19%	-40%
Reduce spending on frontline services (1,079)	69%	12%	-56%

17. In reality, the challenge to produce the legally-required balanced budget is such that it cannot be met by efficiencies alone; the public must be asked to share some of the costs. The solution is not either/or but both/and. One of the tools the Committee wishes to highlight for particular praise is the budget calculator, released as part of the Council's consultation on its proposed budget. This made members of the public confront the constraints around and consequences of allocating money towards particular priorities. Members are reminded of a quotation by a member of the public as reported in the Council's budget packs: "I have newfound appreciation for the work the council does, the scope of its duties and the decisions it makes." It is exactly this that the Committee wishes to see more of – greater transparency and communication over the financial constraints it is operating within. As with this resident, the Committee believes that the better the public are informed of the financial pressures faced by the Council, the more they will adjust their expectations and appreciation of the services it does provide.

Recommendation 2: That the Council takes further measures to increase public understanding of its financial limitations

18. To those working outside the public sector, the breakdown of responsibilities is complex. In Oxfordshire, the majority of residents are served by three layers of

local government – parish/town, district/city and county councils. As across the country there are large amounts of cross working between health and social care. Public Health is not an NHS function but a County Council responsibility. Some schools are academies whilst others are run by the local authority. County and district/city councils both have responsibilities around planning for which they run committees. These points are listed to illustrate the fact that, for members of the public, it is often difficult to know which body is actually responsible for a particular service.

19. Of these, the Committee's view is that the multiple tiers of local authority are least intuitive. The Committee therefore encourages the Council, as part of this strategy, to give consideration as to how the Council can work more closely with district/city and parish councils so that there is more of a one-stop shop for residents; even perfect delivery of the strategy will not fully achieve its objectives if many residents' interactions with the Council take place after a frustrating journey through other councils before finding out to whom they need to speak.

Recommendation 3: That the Council works more closely with district/city and town/parish councils to reduce for residents the impact of the complexity of multiple layers of local authority

20. Another distinction which many members of the public do not make, but which the Council may well do, is between staff who are employed by the Council, and staff of organisations doing work on behalf of the Council. The Council may draw a hard line between 'its' staff and those of sub-contractors, but the interaction with the Council of a wheelchair user who is forced onto the road by a pavement-blocking van will not be improved if the van belongs to a sub-contractor.
21. The Committee recognises that the Council outsources vast quantities of work and that the overwhelming majority of work done on behalf of the Council is not undertaken by Council staff. It is not plausible, therefore, to suggest that the Council extend its levelling up of service standards to include sub-contractors. However, the point raised by the Committee does still stand: members of the public are unlikely to differentiate between work undertaken by the Council and work undertaken on behalf of the Council, and poor interactions with subcontractors will trace over into a poor interaction with the Council. The Committee recommends, therefore, that the Customer Experience Strategy recognises this problem and undertakes to consider the steps it can take to deliver closer alignment between the processes, behaviours and service standards of sub-contractors and the Council's values, behaviours and service standards.

Recommendation 4: That the Council identifies the steps it can reasonably take to extend improvements in service standards to subcontractors.

Extensions to the Draft Strategy

22. One of the observations made by the Committee as to the Customer Experience Strategy is that it is strong on the preventative side of poor interactions, but it is quiet on what the Council will do when things go wrong. The Council has, within the last six months, refreshed its Complaints Policy and Guidance, which incorporates the statutory requirements around complaints handling with the Council's own corporate processes. There are clear overlaps between this and the Strategy and the Committee is pleased to note that the two documents are working in tandem and that the draft strategy undertakes to 'examine complaints, comments and compliments to identify what is working well, and what is not so good'. However, the Committee would wish to see a second step taken.
23. The complaints handling process can be characterised as a discrete interaction with the Council, separate to the initial cause of the complaint. This process is important not only because it is regulated by statute, but also because it comes on the heels of a negative interaction with the Council. Successive negative interactions are likely to compound the sense of frustration by a complainant.
24. The Committee would like to see, therefore, specific reference to not only learning from complaints, which the Council intends to do, but also monitoring how satisfied complainants are that their complaints have been handled in accordance with the Council's complaint-handling principles. There are significant potential improvements to be made in service standards, particularly given the number of ombudsman findings against the Council recently, in knowing that when it does fall short of its own standards that the Council is effective at righting errors when it is made aware of them.

Recommendation 5: That the Council monitors the effectiveness of its complaints-handling as part of its Customer Experience Strategy.

25. As part of its drive towards improvement, the strategy seeks to '[Develop] a better understanding of the Council's customers and what they want.' Part of this work includes profiling customer groups and the types of interactions they have with the Council. Further to this, the Council will seek to 'understand the needs of our more vulnerable customers.' The Committee welcomes both these undertakings but seeks to extend them slightly.
26. When the Council talks about 'vulnerable' individuals it is very easy to revert to the template provided by the Equality Act, which provides a list of protected characteristics where the threat of discrimination is deemed sufficiently serious that statutory protections are required. The list, however, is not exhaustive of all characteristics of people which might make them vulnerable to discrimination or difficulty in accessing services. The Committee wishes to identify two additional groups of people which might afford worthwhile insights into the particular challenges of accessing Council services: those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, and those with English as a second or other language.

27. It is interesting to note that a socio-economic duty was actually placed upon public sector organisations in the early drafts of the Equality Act. In s.1 public sector bodies were to “have due regard to the desirability of exercising [their functions] in a way that is designed to reduce the inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage”. However, this requirement was not implemented, though in Wales and Scotland it has been subsequently adopted.
28. It is clear that there is some overlap between those who are socio-economically disadvantaged and protected characteristics in the Equality Act. For instance, even pre-pandemic, rates of poverty amongst disabled people were over 50% higher than amongst the non-disabled population (31% vs 20%).¹ Likewise, there are correlations between race and income. However, there are other prescient factors which would be missed. Taking one example, the challenges of single-parent families would be overlooked. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2023 annual report, 40% of children in single parent families are in child poverty yet the needs of such families would not be identified. Taking time to profile and learn from socio-economically disadvantaged groups would provide a voice and influence on service design, raising the standard of service received by those who may be in greater need of support.
29. Whilst there is a clear correlation between race and English being a second or other language, the Committee does see value in considering issues around this as a particular standalone category. In some areas of the county, concentrations of those for whom English is not their first language is high; according to ONS data from the 2021 census, Oxford City – the highest in the county – had 18% of people speaking English as a second or other language, almost one in five.² Clearly, not every one of those people will face challenges in accessing services or getting the outcomes they want owing to English being their second language but the risk of that for this group does remain elevated. A second reason for looking at this as a discrete strand is because of how significant a barrier being unable to read Council communications, to write to the Council or to speak with staff can be. As such, this group faces a particularly high chance of experiencing poor service outcomes from their interactions with the Council and would benefit from particular attention.

Recommendation 6: That the Council includes within its profiles of user groups those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, and those for whom English is a second or other language.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

¹ [Nearly half of everyone in poverty is either a disabled person or lives with a disabled person | Disability Rights UK](#)

² [TS024-2021-3.xlsx \(live.com\)](#)

30. The Committee does not intend to consider this item again prior to its consideration at Cabinet but may, in due course, seek an update on progress.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

31. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.
32. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

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Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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