

Call-In Performance, Finance and Customer Focus Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Friday 18 November 2022

PRESENT:

Councillor Penberthy, in the Chair.

Councillor Finn, Vice Chair.

Councillors Hulme, Laing, Lowry, Luggar, Mrs Pengelly, Riley, Stevens, Tofan and Vincent.

Apologies for absence: Councillors Wheeler

Also in attendance: Councillors Bingley, Patel, Haydon, Coker, Mrs Aspinall, Andy Ralphs (Strategic Director of Customer and Corporate Services), Anna Constantinou (Service Manager, Digital and Customer Experience), Peter Honeywell (Transformation Architecture Manager, Digital and Customer Experience), Ross Jago (Head of Governance, performance and Risk).

The meeting started at 9.30 am and finished at 11.21 am.

Note: At a future meeting, the Panel will consider the accuracy of these draft minutes, so they may be subject to change. Please check the minutes of that meeting to confirm whether these minutes have been amended.

29. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interests in accordance with the code of conduct.

30. **Chair's Urgent Business**

There were no items of Chair's urgent business.

31. **Call-in: Decision Reference - LI5 22/23 - Changes to Contact Centre Services**

Councillors Riley and Tofan arrived at 9.35am.

Councillors Haydon, Mrs Aspinall and Coker introduced the reasons for the call-in and highlighted:

- a) Between 1 April to 31 October 2022, 1670 calls were made, of which only 61% were answered;
- b) It could be difficult to complete some Council forms online, such as the Blue Badge Form, meaning those who are not digital excluded or vulnerable, do not wish to use online services;

- c) Not all residents who would need to access services at Central Library would find it easy to get there physically, but furthermore working people would find it harder to get there on the specific day they needed to;
- d) Wait time on the Council Number could be up to an hour long, taking up residents time and money, especially if they had to call from a pay-as-you-go phone;
- e) The data in the report was from the 2011 Census;
- f) Residents were being directed to libraries for support, but most were not open full time, making it harder for residents to access services;
- g) Plymouth was a trauma-informed city and the change policy proposed did not seem in line with this;
- h) They were not satisfied that the list of priorities and non-priorities was correct;
- i) With the number of phone calls unanswered, the Contact Centre should be something that was expanded, not contracted;
- j) Councillors should work collaboratively to improve the lives of residents, and encourage them to access the services they were entitled to, not make it more difficult;
- k) Risks were named in the mitigation measures part of the policy stating that it could lead to isolation of some residents;
- l) Loss of some bus routes and increases in bus fares would make it harder for some residents to get into Central Library.

In response to questions it was highlighted;

- m) An individual who Councillor Haydon had unsuccessfully tried to help get a bus pass, now refuses to try again to apply, following a traumatic visit to St Budeaux Library, which means he will no longer exit his property and travel around the city;
- n) St Budeaux Librarians had explained that post-COVID19, librarian staff were not able to support individuals and the gentleman would need to access an appointment on a Thursday at Central Library;
- o) Some residents would need to walk further to get to a bus stop following the cancelling of some routes, making it harder for less mobile residents of the city to travel to libraries to access services;
- p) Some residents might have had to pay more to travel into the city centre by taxi because a bus route had been removed, a cost some wouldn't have been

able to afford with the Cost of Living Crisis;

- q) Most local libraries had very specific opening hours, making it more difficult for residents to access what they could at their local libraries;
- r) Councillor Haydon and her husband had had difficulty completing a bleu badge form online for a family member, and had to contact customer services.

The Leader, Andy Ralphs (Strategic Director of Customer and Corporate Services), Anna Constantinou (Service Manager, Digital and Customer Experience) and Peter Honeywell (Transformation Architecture Manager, Digital and Customer Experience) explained the reasoning for the decision and highlighted -

- s) The decision had been made as part of the budget setting process for 2023/24 when the Council had been looking to make £37.5 million of savings;
- t) Councillor Bingley could not see how the case studies highlighted by Councillors Haydon, Mrs Aspinall and Coker, would be affected by the decision;
- u) There was no statutory obligation to carry out public consultation for this decision;
- v) Alternative prioritisations had been considered, but a priority access route had been made for Children's Services, Adult Social Care and Homelessness;
- w) Dedicated channels would be set up so the priority areas of the city with the most vulnerable residents would be pushed through more quickly;
- x) A new digital assistance line had been opened to encourage friends and family of those who are digitally excluded to register as so, and therefore would be pushed through more quickly on phone lines moving forward to improve customer service;
- y) A £50,000 In-year saving would be made with a further £88,000-£100,000 saving in 2023/24 with the reformation of the customer service lines with better technology, as seen in other councils across the country;
- z) The changes in the decision were a minor shift within an existing function so it was not felt that an action plan was needed;
- aa) 4.6% of Plymouth's population were digitally excluded, had dropped from 12-13% in years previous;
- bb) The change had been proposed to improve performance from its position at the time;
- cc) Four years previous there were 30 FTE in the contact centre with now 15 FTE with similar or higher volumes of calls;

- dd) The proposal would realign existing resources to answer priority lines more quickly.

In response to questions it was highlighted –

- ee) The Council website had been reviewed and made more customer friendly and easier to read and it had experienced a higher number of visitors;
- ff) Some data had gone in the wrong direction in recent times, but a fundamental review would be undertaken, looking at the types of technology available to assist with improvements and make savings;
- gg) In an average month of 2022 there were 300,000-400,000 website visits with 20,000-30,000 transactions invoked by customers, 12,000-13,000 phone calls of which 20% invoked service requests and face-to-face appointments were within the 10s each week;
- hh) User experience with parking permits and blue badges was poor, but they were done through government systems, however if other local authorities approached these issues differently, this would be looked into;
- ii) The digital assisted line was there to help people complete applications for people who could not do it themselves;
- jj) Another government system that was challenging was the 'Tell Us Once' system, but recent improvements by government had been made;
- kk) There were 4-5 staff in the Central Library at all times, but could not be trained in all areas to support residents, which is why appointments were offered to give residents contact with a more specialist officer;
- ll) A service similar to FaceTime was being looked into to connect library staff with more knowledgeable officers for more timely assistance;
- mm) There was a 12 week target in place for blue badges but this could be affected by a range of different factors;
- nn) A £50,000 saving would be made through vacancy management;
- oo) There would be an emergency line to report hazards although this was missing in the report;
- pp) If a resident wished to complain about their experience with an online form they would have to complete an online feedback form to report it to the Council.

Councillor Mrs Aspinall left the meeting at 10.16am

During discussions between Committee Members it was further highlighted –

- qq) Councillor Casework levels could be impacted, and could have already been impacted by residents who are either digitally excluded or are not satisfied with the digital offer;
- rr) Some of the language such as “customer” and “offer” could be reviewed;
- ss) Any changes needed to be monitored for feedback to ensure the service was being improved and that risk was being monitored;
- tt) A wider communication plan would be developed to inform residents on how to access services.

Councillor Luggar left the meeting at 11.00am

The Leader summed up and explained –

- uu) Residents would still be able to call the Council, with priority lines for certain groups;
- vv) Library hours had been kept at a reduced level since.

Councillor Sally Haydon summed up and explained –

- ww) Concerns over the length of priority queues;
- xx) Concerns over complaints about the online service also having to be made online;
- yy) She believed that further work was needed before the papers were ready for the decision to be made.

The Committee agreed to refer the decision back to the decision maker and made the following recommendations –

- 1) That The Leader and Cabinet use the latest census data from 2021 when reviewing the decision;
- 2) Enquiries regarding bus passes should be included on the priority list;
- 3) Prioritisation should be given to residents who were calling about .Gov systems such as Blue Badges or Tell Us Once, as issues with these systems had been identified;
- 4) That Libraries and Councillor Casework to be included in the risk mitigation plan;
- 5) More clarification on how the changes would be communicated to those residents who are not on social media, online or do not read the local newspaper.

