

Report to Cabinet

12 July 2023

Subject:	Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board – Customer Journey Scrutiny Review
Cabinet Member:	Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care, Councillor Suzanne Hartwell
Director:	Surjit Tour Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer
Key Decision:	No
Contact Officer:	Democratic Services Manager, Suky Suthi-Nagra Suky_Suthinagra@sandwell.gov.uk Democratic Services Officer, Anthony Lloyd Ant_lloyd@sandwell.gov.uk

1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That Cabinet consider the findings of the Customer Journey Scrutiny Review report as set out in Appendix 1.
- 1.2 That Cabinet approve in full, approve in part, or do not approve the following recommendations arising from the Customer Journey Scrutiny Review:-
 - (1) that the Director of Regeneration and Growth/Assistant Chief Executive, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources and Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, be authorised to agree a customer care standards/charter, and staff responsibilities in relation to those standards to ensure;
 - a) that “back-office” staff take ownership and accountability of customer requests received via Contact Centre Agents;



- b) a standard approach is taken to making officer contact numbers available on Outlook and to customers to prevent additional calls being made to the Contact Centre;
 - c) a standard approach to the complaints process and deadlines for responding to complaints are clear and accessible across all Council services;
 - d) that key contacts are identified within each service area to aid Customer Service Agents in their enquiries;
 - e) that residents are regularly updated and informed about the current process of their request/query.
- (2) that the Director of Regeneration and Growth/Assistant Chief Executive be authorised to commission/develop a customer training package that incorporates the following topics:-
- a) The completeness of response letters
 - b) Methods to manage customer expectations and awareness around the Council's remit and responsibilities.
- (3) that the Director of Regeneration and Growth/Assistant Chief Executive ensure that all members of staff undertake training around customer care standards as identified in (2) and that staff performance against these standards be incorporated within the appraisal process;
- (4) that mandatory corporate customer service training be included as part of the induction process for all staff;
- (5) that the Director of Regeneration and Growth/Assistant Chief Executive, in consultation with the Director of Finance, investigate options for procuring a single joint Customer Relations System across the Council;
- (6) that the Director for Director of Regeneration and Growth/Assistant Chief Executive considers the introduction of automated feedback surveys and that regular feedback on Council enquires/complaints are analysed and shared with Directorates;
- (7) That the Director for Director of Regeneration and Growth/Assistant Chief Executive introduces corporate guidelines in relation to the use of Council contact numbers to ensure that all



officers are contactable and that contact details are updated regularly;

- (8) that the Director of Regeneration and Growth/Assistant Chief Executive considers the feasibility of amalgamating the current three contact centres (Corporate Contact Centre, Revenues and Benefits Contact Centre and Adult Social Care Care) into a single contact centre number with staff specialising in various areas;
- (9) that the Director of Regeneration and Growth/Assistant Chief Executive, as part of the refresh of the Council's website, ensures the Council continues to promote the use of Sandwell Digital First and the Council's website as the first point for accessing information and raising an issue/request;
- (10) that as part of the customer journey review being undertaken, the Director of Regeneration and Growth/Assistant Chief Executive reviews current timescales for responding to enquiries and consider a reduction, wherever possible, including member enquiries being reduced from 10 working days to 3-5 days.

1.3 That, in connection with 1.2 above, a further report be submitted to the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board, within 2 months' time, on the decision of Cabinet.

2 Reasons for Recommendations







2.1 In 2022, the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board agreed to investigate the experience of Sandwell residents when accessing or requesting Council services; this would be referred to as the "Customer Journey". This was in response to:-

- concerns raised by residents about response times to queries
- member's experiences when trying to contact services/individual officers (e.g. delayed/no response).
- addressing the objectives of the Council's Improvement Plan to improve the customer journey experience
- to improve communication between residents and the council.



- 2.2 The Board recognises that significant improvements need to be made in order to help the Council leave intervention. Customer services is of public interest and aligned with the Council's corporate priorities.
- 2.3 A scoping document was created (Appendix B) which carried out the rationale and provided suggestions of ways forward for the review to progress. Several lines of inquiry were identified for the review alongside a range of methods that could be used to gather evidence including the utilisation of Council surveys, desktop research, meetings with key stakeholders and site visits. As part of the Council's Improvement Plan, the Council was seeking to embed values and behaviours as a foundation of the council's workforce strategy. The work of the review would therefore complement ongoing work to address the recommendations set out in the Improvement Plan.
- 2.4 The Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board subsequently conducted a scrutiny review, establishing a Working Group to carry out the review and ascertain an understanding of the current customer journey experienced by residents and users of Sandwell Council's services.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	The Best Start in Life for Children and Young People
	People Live Well and Age Well
	Strong Resilient Communities
	Quality Homes in Thriving Neighbourhoods
	A Strong and Inclusive Economy
	A Connected and Accessible Sandwell



4 Context and Key Issues

4.1 In 22 March 2022, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities announced an intervention package and a set of Directions to ensure the council was able to comply with its best value duty under Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1999. These Directions were in-part influenced by the Grant Thornton report following their Value for Money Governance Review of December 2021.

4.2 The Government's intervention package requires the preparation and agreement of an Improvement Plan that will:

- deliver rapid and sustainable improvements in governance, leadership and culture in the council;
- secure improvement in relation to the proper functioning of the scrutiny and associated audit functions; and
- secure continuous improvement in all services.

4.3 In response, the Council developed an Improvement Plan which included proposed mechanisms for governance and assurance.

4.4 One of the objectives within the Plan is to improve the customer journey experience to meet residents needs and demands. This is a corporate priority for the authority

4.5 The Board aimed to identify, if deemed necessary, any outstanding issues with the Council's customer-focused services. Any recommendations considered needed to be best practice and be in line with Sandwell's Vision 2030. Intended outcomes sought:-

- to address the outcomes from the Improvement Plan relating to the customer journey experience and ensure it meets the needs and demands of our residents;
- to understand if Sandwell residents can obtain the assistance they require in an efficient but timely manner;
- to identify if there is a need for alternating approaches to customer service when considering residents with varying circumstances e.g. residents without internet access/disabilities;
- to investigate the customer journey process and how residents are accessing Council services (physical, digital or via telephone);



- to assess if the Council is providing a welcoming, friendly, and helpful service with accurate and timely advice;
- to consider if the Customer Portal is efficient and effective at delivering it's aims and objectives;
- to identify if the Councillor Portal is fit for purpose.

5 Alternative Options

5.1 There are no alternative options. The Cabinet may approve all, some, or none of the recommendations.

6 Implications

Resources:	Financial implications may arise from some of the recommendations such as the introduction of new software.
Legal and Governance:	The council is required to develop and implement an improvement plan that includes “actions to deliver rapid and sustainable improvements in governance, leadership and culture in the Authority.” Failure to comply with these Directions may lead to further intervention measures for the council.
Risk:	Organisational Culture and the Customer Journey is included within the Improvement Plan Risk Register, recognising the importance of organisation culture to successfully implement the necessary changes and embed the improvement.
Equality:	The Customer Journey will look to address any gaps in equality, diversity and inclusion and will ensure that all strategies are aligned.
Health and Wellbeing:	Employee and resident engagement and a positive organisational culture brings benefits to organisations, including greater customer/client satisfaction, increased employee happiness and wellbeing, and increased productivity and creativity.
Social Value:	The new values and behaviour will underpin work of the council, defining expectations for ways of working, and in turn directly influencing our delivery of social value.



Climate Change:	Current and previous engagement with residents has been done remotely or via the telephone where this approach will achieve the desired outcome. This reduces staff travel to offices or other venues. However, some engagement with residents is conducted face to face and from Council buildings which will mean increased staff journeys which will generate carbon emissions.
Corporate Parenting	Better frontline services will have an overall impact on how the Council responds to its customers. Precise and timely responses will be extremely advantageous in ensuring the Council fulfils its corporate parenting responsibilities, especially in relation to directing children’s social care enquiries.

7. Appendices

7.1 Appendix A – Customer Journey Scrutiny Review Report

8. Background Papers

None

