Customer Services

Report of the Neighbourhoods Committee

April 2017
Members of Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Committee

Cllr Shabana Dhedhi, Chair
Cllr Simon Miller, Vice-Chair
Cllr Marion Fitzgerald
Cllr Jemma Hemsted
Cllr Louise Mitchell
Cllr Steve Terry
Executive Summary

Introduction

Why is Customer Service Important?

1.1 The Council is committed to providing the best possible customer standards when residents access and use its services\(^1\). Residents deserve a quality service experience. They should be able to contact the Council and receive relevant information that will deal with their service request or enquiry quickly and that this should be delivered in a friendly and helpful manner, by well trained and motivated staff. The Council’s transformation programme *Redefining Waltham Forest 2020* places a strong emphasis on focussing on the priorities of residents and moving towards digitally driven services, which are central to developing effective customer services.

1.2 The Committee welcomes the appointment of a Portfolio Lead Member specifically responsible for customer services, who is currently Councillor Sharon Waldron, Portfolio Lead Member for Digital, ICT and Customer Services. The Committee are strongly of the opinion that this role should be retained, to ensure a clear focus for driving improvements in performance in relation to set customer service standards.

Monitoring Council Services

\(^1\) The Council of 2020
1.3 The Committee was told that in common with many local authorities, the Council lacks consistent information regarding customer service performance across the organisation. The Committee was informed that there is an apparent discrepancy in addressing queries and complaints across the Council. Based on anecdotal evidence, the quality, promptness and type of response to queries varies from each service area and those which are ignored are often escalated to complaints. Managers believe that new ways of collecting this data will help remedy this situation. In future the Council will gather its performance intelligence through two main sources: satisfaction surveys and secret shopping. Central to this drive for improvement is the appointment of GovMetrics to roll out a customer service improvement programme.

GovMetrics

1.4 GovMetrics provides several tools that will enable the Council to better compare its performance to others, provide focussed insight into why customers are dissatisfied and help managers identify actions to improve satisfaction. Part of this package facilitates the gathering of customer feedback on service delivery at the point of contact and helps to establish why customers are satisfied or dissatisfied. Underpinning this programme is a recognition that the Council needs to increase its understanding of resident's real experience of accessing Council services and to identify areas for improvement.
Secret Shopping

1.5 Mystery or Secret Shopping can be an important method in understanding and assessing resident’s experience of services. The Committee was told that the Council is planning to undertake a secret shopping programme for front line services including those delivered by the Council’s contractors and partners. A key issue for Customer Services is recharging contractors for the improved customer insights that will be gathered through carrying out mystery shopping exercises. If contractors contribute towards the cost of such exercises, the Council will be able to undertake more and better focussed customer research. The Council is now in the process of commissioning this work and selecting a suitable supplier who can manage mystery shopping exercises.

Customer Services Centre

1.6 The Council’s Customer Services Centre is located at Willow House. As a result of the Council’s Digital Transformation Programme, the Customer Services Centre is now being restructured into four teams from the current nine, with staff numbers reduced from 52 to 36 full time equivalents (FTEs). Managers told Members that they recognised that some customers (especially the elderly and vulnerable people) will continue to need someone to speak to directly on key issues.

1.7 Customer Services Centre managers are now building strong relationships with front line services and together are working to re-design and streamline on-line business processes. This
involves going through specific transactions step by step and using customer feedback to eliminate confusion and unnecessary duplication in accessing services, from the customer perspective.

1.8 Members were told that a major impediment for Customer Services Centre staff in providing a responsive service is that the staff directory is not accurate or up to date. Staff cited examples where the staff structure chart did not keep up with the turnover in senior officers and where phone numbers are either omitted or wrong.

**Webchat**

1.9 Members were informed that the Council has launched a new webchat service on its website which allows residents to chat with Customer Services Centre staff through the website rather than on the phone. The service aims to assist residents go through the steps of making on-line transactions, rather than complete these for residents, in line with the broader aims of Digital by Default. The service has eight trained operators as of January 2017.

1.10 Since Webchat went live on 1st December 2016, 2282 chats have taken place. The average time to answer a chat is 30 seconds and the average length of a chat is six minutes. In terms of customer feedback 11% of customers recently completed a post chat survey. Of those who responded, 53% are very satisfied and 27% satisfied with the Webchat service.
Only 20% are dissatisfied with Webchat. 52% of respondents said that if it was not for Webchat, they would have otherwise contacted the Council by phone.

**My Account**

1.11 Members were informed that staff at the Customer Services Centre use a version of My Account, so they are able to track the activity of residents who ask for assistance. It was stated that Council Tax payments will shortly be possible through My Account. My Account will shortly be rebadged as My Waltham Forest. The Centre is working under a strategy that encourages residents to report service requests or enquiries through My Account, rather than through webform, which they do not have to log into. Residents who call the Council directly will also be directed to use My Account rather than going through the Centre. Council contact numbers are not prominently displayed on the Council’s website, so as to incentivise residents to use My Account and webform to carry out transactions.

**Digital by default**

1.12 Members were informed that there are currently five digital courses for Customer Services Centre staff to attend to ensure customer needs are properly addressed, with the aim of ensuring more staff become digital champions. Collaborative work has also been undertaken with Age UK on the assisted digital programme to improve the knowledge of elderly residents about the benefits of going digital and how to use it to help them access services more quickly.
The Committee was told that to encourage more people to use My Account more can be done to reassure residents that the Council will without exemption, protect sensitive customer data and not release it to third parties. The Committee were strongly of the opinion that the Council must give clear guarantees to this effect. The Committee believe the Council needs to consider more carefully how its on-line services are marketed to ensure residents understand that any data collected will not be shared without their consent.

1.13 The Council has worked hard to build the digital network and now successfully recruited and trained around 160 champions to engage with customers and provide practical help in how to use the new technology. These champions have been recruited both within and outside the Council. The Committee praised the work that had been undertaken to build up the network of digital champions recruited within the local community.

Embedding Excellence within Services

1.14 The Committee strongly believe that delivering improved customer service does not just rest with staff members who work at the Customer Services Centre. This responsibility applies to everyone who works at, or represents, the Council. The Committee met with a staff member who had won an award for delivering excellent customer service, this officer was a social worker rather than a member of staff in an explicitly customer service role. The Committee was impressed by the officers’ dedication and believe there is much that services across the whole Council can learn from the example
of this officer. The Committee was especially struck by the fact that good customer care is not just transactional, based on quick and accurate service, but is also about providing a responsive personal service and taking into account the different needs of each customer.

1.15 The Committee felt that staff would benefit from undertaking focussed customer care training and that customer care might be more strongly reflected the next time HR review corporate job descriptions or specifications. However, part of transforming customer service is to make all Council staff clearly aware that they are responsible for delivering excellent customer service in all aspects of their work and in their everyday contact with the public.
Summary of Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** The Committee recommends that the new Leader of the Council retains a Portfolio Lead Member explicitly responsible for customer care.

**Recommendation 2:** Directorates should develop their own KPIs incorporating the GovMetrics data to ensure continual improvement in customer service across the Council is effectively measured. These KPIs should be included in performance reporting that is sent to scrutiny, as well as the Council’s overall performance.

**Recommendation 3:** That mystery shopping exercises are carried out, where the budget is available, on a regular basis; and that Council contractors are requested to contribute, so the cost is reduced.

**Recommendation 4:** The staff directory and staff structure chart should be updated on a more frequent basis than at present and a named manager should be responsible for ensuring the accuracy of this information.

**Recommendation 5:** Consider if a digital helpdesk should be established, if this can be achieved within existing budgets, to help residents solve problems themselves by using digital tools.

**Recommendation 6:** The Council should counter any misconception that in promoting greater use of My Account, access to sensitive data will be compromised. The message needs to be reinforced that resident’s data will be protected and only shared with their consent.
Recommendation 7: All staff should have “customer service” as a core competency included in their job description and specification.

Recommendation 8: If a budget can be found, Mary Gober International—or a similar training company—should be asked to provide a training session at the Council, which all officers across the Council should be encouraged to attend.
2. Introduction

1.1 In June 2016 the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Committee chose to look at Customer Services for its themed review. Although the Council does not currently have a corporate customer services strategy, one is being developed and will be completed by this summer.

1.2 This themed review has been undertaken for a number of reasons. Firstly, customer service is important to residents to ensure the Council delivers reliable and efficient customer services that address resident enquiries and requests in a fast and friendly manner. The Council knows providing effective customer services is a key issue for ward councillors who are aware of the impact on constituents when public services – not just Council services – don’t deal with and resolve complaints from members of the public about poor customer service. Members need to be assured that residents’ expectations are being met and their experience of Council services are satisfactory.

1.3 Secondly, over recent years the Council has invested heavily in improving its customer services infrastructure, most significantly the establishment of a Council wide Customer Services Centre to provide a comprehensive day time and out of hours’ service. It is important to ensure this investment leads to a better customer experience and contributes to the Council’s planned improvement journey.

1.4 Thirdly, the Council will shortly be rolling out a new customer services strategy. The Committee wishes to ensure that the four principles (resident focussed, insight led, commercially minded and digitally driven) set out in the Council’s “Redefining Waltham Forest 2020” ambitions are embedded in the Council’s broader customer services function. The Committee hopes that this report and recommendations will be taken into account in developing the new customer services strategy and that this Committee has the opportunity to comment on the strategy before it goes to Cabinet for sign-off.

1.5 In conducting the review, the Committee agreed to investigate the following:
   - how the Council is performing across the board, reviewing future plans and making recommendations on how further improvements can be made;
   - best practice from across the customer services sector;
the characteristics of good customer service that can be applied to areas of poor customer services, to raise standards across the Council and develop recommendations.

1.6 Three sessions were scheduled for the review (on 11th October 2016, 29th November 2016 and 26th January 2017)2 to carry out the work associated with gathering evidence, to make conclusions around the themed review topic and produce a set of recommendations for improvement. As part of the evidence gathering for the review, two Councillors (Councillors Dhedhi and Mitchell) also visited the Customer Services Centre in January 2017.

3. Background

Why is Customer Service Important?

1.7 The Committee was told that the Council is committed to providing the best possible customer standards when residents access and use its services. Residents deserve a quality service experience. They should be able to contact the Council and receive relevant information that will deal with their service request or enquiry quickly and that this should be delivered in a friendly and helpful manner, by well trained and motivated staff. The Council’s transformation programme Redefining Waltham Forest 2020 places a strong emphasis on focussing on the priorities of residents and moving towards digitally driven services, which are central to developing effective customer services. Providing high levels of customer service is also a way of securing further gains in the Council’s performance and improving overall levels of customer satisfaction, for example measured through resident surveys or mystery shopper exercises.

1.8 The Council also has a growing number of contractors who provide commissioned services on its behalf and the range of partner agencies which collaborate with the Council in delivering services to clients is increasingly diverse. Given this growing complexity the Council and partners must clearly focus on getting its customer service right and provide a consistently high standard of service, which is recognised and valued by customers.

1.9 The importance of good customer service is illustrated in the quarter 2 (2016/17) Corporate Performance Report statistics that were reported to the Neighbourhoods Committee on 22nd February. The report stated the main reason for 41% (957) of complaints was due to service failures (delays, poor quality and non-provision of services) and 33% (784) of complaints were due to staff conduct. It should also be borne in mind that 46% of these complaints were upheld and another 12% were partly upheld.

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3 The Council of 2020

4 Corporate Performance Report Quarter2 2016/17
1.10 The Committee welcomes the appointment of a Portfolio Lead Member specifically responsible for customer services, who is currently Councillor Sharon Waldron, Portfolio Lead Member for Digital, ICT and Customer Services. The Committee are strongly of the opinion that this role should be retained, to ensure a clear focus for driving improvements in performance in relation to set customer service standards.

Recommendation 1: The Committee recommends that the new Leader of the Council retains a Portfolio Lead Member explicitly responsible for customer service.
4. Monitoring Council Services

1.1 The Committee was told that in common with many local authorities, the Council lacks consistent information regarding customer service performance for the organisation as a whole. The Committee was informed that there is an apparent discrepancy in addressing queries and complaints across the Council. Based on anecdotal evidence, the quality, promptness and type of response to queries varies from each service area and those which are ignored are often escalated to complaints. Managers believe that new ways of collecting this data will help remedy this situation.

1.2 The importance of having hard data to be able to monitor progress in delivering better customer service is illustrated in the interim evaluation of the LGAs Digital Experts Programme Report, where one of the broad messages emerging from the Programme concludes that: “the projects that have proved best able to demonstrate in delivering benefits, financial savings, improved outcomes for residents, customer stories and feedback from users, are those where a measurement framework has been put in place at an early stage. While it may seem difficult to justify the effort involved in creating such a framework when resources are tight and many short-term-term decisions have to be made to address immediate budget constraints, having a good baseline remains a valuable tool for improvement as well as providing evidence to support the business case for future investment.”

1.3 Through Redefining Waltham Forest 2020 the Council is now committed to improving customer services. In future the Council will gather its performance intelligence through two main sources: satisfaction surveys and secret shopping. Central to this drive for improvement is the appointment of GovMetrics to roll out a customer service improvement programme.

1.4 Govmetrics provides several tools that will enable the Council to better compare its performance to others, provide focussed insight into why customers are dissatisfied and help managers identify actions to improve satisfaction. Part of the package facilitates the gathering of customer feedback on service delivery at the point of contact and help to establish why customers are satisfied or dissatisfied.

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5 http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/7632544/L16-98+The+Digital+Experts+Programme-03.pdf/3b919eda-bcb4-40fc-8988-3477ff549a86
1.5 The specific objectives for this programme are:

- measure potential shifts in customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction when implementing change;
- help inform channel shift to less expensive access channels;
- help to get things “right first time” thereby limiting avoidable contact and reducing rework costs;
- enable benchmarking comparisons with other providers to promote the adoption of best practice.

1.6 Underpinning this programme is a recognition that the Council needs to increase its understanding of residents real experience of accessing Council services and to identify areas for improvement; as well as to give due credit for areas of good service where standards are regularly met or exceeded. Also, the programme will help to
establish a baseline against which to measure future change and improvement in delivering enhanced customer service.

1.7 GovMetrics will allow the Council to compare performance data for individual departments as well as against 75 other local authorities. The Committee suggests that services should develop a limited number of key performance indicators (KPIs) using the GovMetrics data, to compare their performance against other providers and where necessary make improvements.

**Recommendation 2:** Directorates should develop their own KPIs incorporating the GovMetrics data, to ensure continual improvement in customer services across the Council is effectively measured. These KPIs should be included in performance reporting that is sent to scrutiny, as well as the Council’s overall performance.

1.8 GovMetrics went live on 19th December 2016. Initial analysis shows that customers are most satisfied with their experience through the phone and face to face contact. Statistics for January 2017 shows satisfaction is around 70% for face to face contact and 90% for phone contact. The level of satisfaction for web based contact in contrast is only just over 30%. The most recent data from the Contact Centre’s Customer Satisfaction Report for the period 1st December 2016- 2nd March 2017 shows overall customer satisfaction with phone contact is very high. 1548 (84%) of respondents said they received a good service, 196 (11%) received a satisfactory service and only 97 (5%) said they received a poor service.

1.9 The same report showed overall customer satisfaction with web contact is much lower. 361 (27%) of respondents said they received a good service, 143 (11%) received a satisfactory service and 817 (62%) said they received a poor service. The contrast between customers’ experience of phone and digital contact reflects that there is a strong element of self-selection in the feedback from customers and that customers who have a poor web contact experience are more likely to give negative feedback.

**Secret Shopping**

1.10 Mystery or Secret Shopping can be an important method in understanding and assessing resident’s experience of services. The Committee was told that the Council is planning to undertake a secret shopping programme for front line services including those delivered by the Council’s contractors and partners. A key issue for Customer
Services is recharging contractors for the improved customer insights that will be gathered through carrying out mystery shopping exercises. If contractors contribute towards the cost of such exercises, the Council will be able to undertake more and better focussed customer research. The Council is now in the process of commissioning this work and selecting a suitable supplier who can manage mystery shopping exercises.

Recommendation 3: That mystery shopping exercises are carried out, where the budget is available, on a regular basis; and that Council contractors are requested to contribute, so the cost to the Council is reduced.
5. Customer Services Team

5.1 The Council’s Customer Services Centre is located at Willow House. Members were told the Centre handles queries that come into the Council through four different channels:

**Telephone calls:** this data is for services that have been channel shifted only. The latest figures\(^6\) show that for January 2017, 6087 contacts (46%) are still made on the phone. Although this figure has dropped significantly from January 2016 where the corresponding figures was 7389 contacts (73%) made on the phone.

**Emails:** according to the same statistics, for channel shifted services only, email contact has fallen dramatically, from January 2016 where it was responsible for 3% of contacts, down to 1% for January 2017.

**Webform:** information filled in on a webform goes straight to contractors for a quick turnaround, as does information logged through My Account;

**My Account:** this website allows residents to make service request or report a fault without having to log in. Given this channel is so important for the Council's digital transformation programme, My Account is covered in more detail later in this report.

5.2 As a result of the Council’s Digital Transformation Programme, the Customer Services Centre is now being restructured into four teams from the current nine, with staff numbers reduced from 52 to 36 full time equivalents (FTEs). Managers told Members that they recognised that some customers (especially the elderly and vulnerable people) will continue to need someone to speak to directly on vital issues such as adult social care and council tax billing.

5.3 Members were told that staff are multi-skilled in different service areas, but they tend to focus on one specific service area, especially where a high volume of contacts are experienced. The Customer Services Centre is open between 9.00am-5.00pm during week days and an out of hours’ service is provided by a call centre in Sheffield (GDIT). Some out of hours emergencies (social care for children and adults, homelessness,

\(^{6}\) Channel Management: PLM Update January 2017
noise, highways emergencies, etc.) are referred straight to a duty officer who is experienced in escalating matters on where necessary.

5.4 Customer Services Centre managers are now building strong relationships with front line services and together are working to re-design and streamline on-line business processes. This involves going through specific transactions step by step and using customer feedback to eliminate confusion and unnecessary duplication in accessing services from the customer perspective. Managers also plan to adopt Government Digital Standards to ensure all online transactions adhere to nationally recognised best practice.

5.5 Members were told that a major impediment for Customer Services Centre staff in providing a responsive service is that the staff directory is not accurate or up to date. Staff cited examples where the staff structure chart did not keep up with the turnover in senior officers and where phone numbers are either omitted or wrong. These issues make it difficult in many cases for customer services staff to refer residents to the appropriate officer in a timely manner.

An example of a staff directory search for “housing”
Recommendation 4: The staff directory and staff structure chart should be updated on a more frequent basis than at present and a named manager should be responsible for ensuring the accuracy of this information.

Webchat

5.6 Members were informed that the Council has launched a new webchat service on its website, which allows residents to chat with Customer Services Centre staff through the website rather than on the phone. The service aims to assist residents go through the steps of making on-line transactions, rather than complete these for residents, in line with the broader aims of Digital by Default. The service has eight trained operators as of January 2017.

5.7 The Council is currently getting information on what residents are using webchat for and to gauge future demand for the service. At present the service is only available when Customer Services Centre staff are available to start the chat. Recently an experiment was carried out on the optimum level of web chatter needed to fulfil the role of the service. The days when two advisors are available is compared to normal days when only one advisor is available. The experiment revealed the number of advisors had minimal impact on volumes, so even where additional capacity was available on average only an extra ten customers took this up, well within the capacity of one person to manage. When, and if, the decision is taken to roll out webchat across the whole website, the staffing of the webchat will need to be looked at again.

5.8 Since Webchat went live on 1st December 2016, 2,282 chats have taken place. The average time to answer a chat is 30 seconds and the average length of a chat is six minutes. In terms of customer feedback 11% of customers recently completed a post chat survey. Of those who responded, 53% are very satisfied and 27% satisfied with the Webchat service. Only 20% are dissatisfied with Webchat. 52% of respondents said that if it was not for Webchat, they would have otherwise contacted the Council by phone. 20% of respondents said they would have looked elsewhere and 16% said they would have emailed the Council.

5.9 The Committee was informed that the next steps in the rolling out of Webchat would be closing the loop in implementing processes for managing all the common customer issues. Webchat data will be used to design and build trouble shooting and self-help
guides to add to the website and signpost these for customers. The number and range of services where webchat is offered is also to be increased and a specification and procurement plan is now being developed for a Webchat post pilot.

My Account

5.10 The Council has opted to use the My Account website rather than create a dedicated app as some local authorities have. Members were informed that staff at the Customer Services Centre also use a version of My Account, so they are able to track the activity of residents who ask for assistance. It was stated that Council Tax payments will shortly be possible through My Account. My Account will shortly be rebranded as My Waltham Forest.

5.11 The Committee was told that the Centre is working under a strategy that encourages residents to report service requests or enquiries through My Account, rather than through webform, which they do not have to log into. Residents who call the Council directly will also be directed to use My Account rather than going through the Centre. Council contact numbers are not prominently displayed on the Council’s website, so as to incentivise residents to use My Account and webform to carry out transactions.

5.12 The discussion between Members and managers highlighted Waltham Forest has not set up a dedicated digital helpdesk to field queries from local people. If residents have issues or problems associated with My Account or webform it is difficult for them to resolve these themselves, but this is what they have to do, because there is no helpdesk available. Members were informed that there are no face to face contact points for residents who have general queries. This was because of the cost of providing such a service and the fact that it runs counter to the aims of switching to Digital by Default.

Recommendation 5: Consider if a digital helpdesk should be established, if this can be achieved within existing budgets, to help residents solve problems themselves by using digital tools.
6. Digital by Default

Assisted Digital

6.1 Members raised the issue of the level of support from the public in moving to a Digital by Default approach and if there was any opposition from service users. Managers confirmed that at present there was no significant opposition and stressed the benefits of switching to digital which allows the Council to interact better with and reach more residents. The one exception to this move away from direct customer contact is booking registrars appointments for death related issues with families of the deceased, because of their sensitivity and potential to cause distress.

6.2 Members were informed that there are currently five digital courses for Customer Services Centre staff to attend to ensure customer needs are properly addressed, with the aim of ensuring more staff become digital champions. Collaborative work has also been undertaken with Age UK on the assisted digital programme to improve the knowledge of elderly residents about the benefits of going digital and how to use it to help them access services more quickly.

6.3 Staff are provided with a digital reference guide to help them recognise signs for when and how to promote the Council’s digital services. Events such as the “Big Weekenders” are also being successfully used to encourage local people to sign up and become digital champions.

6.4 Members were told that it was inevitable that some residents would have difficulties moving to digital. While 93% of Waltham Forest residents are online, many of these will not be able to navigate digital systems such as My Account and webforms. There are challenges in communicating why the Council is making these changes, as well as providing regular information to engender trust, amongst residents who are not confident using online tools or services. The Committee was told that to encourage more people to use My Account more can be done to reassure residents that the Council will, without exemption, protect sensitive customer data and not release it to third parties. The Committee were strongly of the opinion that the Council must give clear guarantees to this effect. The Committee believe the Council needs to consider more carefully how its on-line services are marketed to ensure residents understand that any data collected and only shared with their consent.
Recommendation 6: The Council should counter any misconception that in promoting greater use of My Account, access to sensitive residents will be compromised. The message needs to be reinforced that resident’s data will be protected and only shared with their consent.

6.5 The Council has worked hard to build the digital network and has now successfully recruited and trained around 160 champions to engage with customers and provide practical help in how to use the new technology. These champions have been recruited both within and outside the Council. The Committee praised the work that had been undertaken to build up the network of digital champions recruited within the local community. These actions included the collaboration with Age UK and advertising digital sessions on their website, the on-line training offered through the Digital Champions Network, around understanding basic competencies such as how to use on-line banking and shopping and using social media.

6.6 The efforts to increase recruitment of digital champions amongst Council staff was also recognised including the introduction of bespoke courses, assessment centres to test relevant skills, as well as staff listening to actual customer service calls and being given feedback on their performance.

6.7 The latest statistics on channel shift, provided through the Channel Management: PLM Update for February 2017 indicates that digital take-up of services has exceeded 50% for the first time. The growing uptake of My Account continues on an impressive upward trajectory, with take-up increasing by several fold, from the inception of My Account. In February 2016 there were 7,945 My Account contacts, that figure had increased to 49,748 transactions by February 2017.

6.8 The Committee learnt another tool in providing digital assistance has been developed using Browse Aloud software, which translates 30 different languages as users browse the Council’s website in voice for European languages and in text for non-European languages. While the Committee welcomed this initiative, it was felt more needed to be done to improve the non-European languages service provided.

6.9 The Committee was told that in January 2017, 53% of all contacts are now made online, a significant increase on the corresponding figure of 24% for January 2016. The graph below shows that consistent, incremental progress in digital take-up was made over the course of 2016. Managers anticipate further strong growth following the
release of Council Tax solution, which has the potential to create 100,000 linked accounts.

My Account take-up

Digital Adoption: All Services
7. Embedding Excellence Within Services

7.1 The Committee strongly believe that delivering improved customer service does not just rest with staff members who work at the Customer Services Centre. This responsibility applies to everyone who works at, or represents, the Council. The Committee met with a staff member who had won an award for delivering excellent customer service, this officer was a social worker rather than a member of staff in an explicitly customer service role. The Committee was impressed by the officers’ dedication and believe there is much that services across the whole Council can learn from the example of this officer. The Committee was especially struck by the fact that good customer care is not just transactional, based on quick and accurate service, but is also about providing a responsive personal service and taking into account the different needs of each customer.

7.2 The Committee felt that staff would benefit from undertaking focussed customer care training and that customer care might be more strongly reflected the next time HR review corporate job descriptions or specifications. However, part of transforming customer service is to make all Council staff clearly aware that they are responsible for delivering excellent customer service in all aspects of their work and in their everyday contact with the public.

**Recommendation 7:** All staff should have “customer service” as a core competency included in their job description and specification.

7.3 The Committee heard about the training sessions given by Mary Gober International. Mary is a recognised international expert in articulating what excellent customer service is and delivering excellent customer service in practice. She recently organised a training event for senior management at the Council. Senior Managers found the training very useful in providing them with a clear insight of what is needed to drive improved customer service at the Council.

7.4 The Committee believes that given the value senior managers placed on the training sessions facilitated by Mary Gober, and the benefits that could be realised from embedding a culture of customer service throughout the whole organisation, that the
Council should consider the role that an external facilitator could play in creating a customer service ethos that is shared across the whole of the Council.

Recommendation 8: If a suitable budget can be found, Mary Gober International - or a similar training company - should be asked to provide a training session at the Council, which all officers across the Council should be encouraged to attend.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Improving customer service across the board is a priority for the Council. The Committee welcomes how Waltham Forest is embracing digital technology and making it as inclusive as possible in rolling it out.

8.2 The Committee is gratified that customer feedback is generally very positive about what the Council is trying to achieve to improve customer service and this data is being used to drive future improvement. The Committee is also pleased to see staff and other organisations championing digital channels to the Council’s customers and helping them use new technology.

8.3 The Committee believes the eight recommendations it has made will assist the Council in building on the good practice already established and provide useful proposals as to how this improvement journey can go forward.