1. SUMMARY

1.1 This report sets out the findings and recommendations of a Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Committee report on customer services.

1.2 Cabinet is asked to note the findings of the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Committee report, which can be found in full in Appendix 1, and the response of officers to the recommendations, which can be found in Appendix 2.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That Cabinet note the content of this report.

2.2 That the Cabinet Members note the suggested response from officers, which suggests that Cabinet adopt recommendations 1, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8, and agree to amended versions of recommendation 2 and 4, as set out in paragraph 3.5.
3. PROPOSAL

3.1 In July 2016, the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Committee agreed to carry out a themed review into the Council’s approach to customer services. The primary concern of the review was how successfully the Council was introducing its digital agenda in enhancing its customer service offer, whether local residents felt confident in using these new tools and the results of customer feedback in terms of evidence which demonstrated recent innovations were leading to improved customer satisfaction.

3.2 The Committee looked at customer services at three of its meetings:

- At the 11th October meeting the Committee heard from officers on a definition of customer service, examples of best practice and the Council’s future plans for improving customer service across the board.

- At the 29th November meeting the Committee was told how the Council has been performing, the results of customer feedback and the role of GovMetrics, a new customer satisfaction tool the Council has recently procured.

- At the 26th January meeting the Committee was briefed on the Council’s adoption of assisted digital technology and on developments around staff training and recruitment to the Customer Service Centre.

Councillors Dhedhi and Mitchell also visited the Centre in January 2017 to see how the Centre works and how it is improving the customer experience.

3.3 The report (Appendix1) was considered and adopted after the final meeting on 19th April. The report puts forward recommendations to further support and improve the Council’s approach to customer services. It is not anticipated that the recommendations will not result in any additional expenditure.

3.4 The recommendations made by the Report were:

**Recommendation 1:** Consider if a digital helpdesk should be established, if this can be achieved 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.

3.5 Officers have commented on the recommendations, and are recommending that the Cabinet endorse all recommendations 1, 3, 5, 6 and 8. They are recommending that amended versions of recommendations 2 and 4 be amended to the following text:

**Recommendation 2:** Directorates should develop their own KPIs 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 4:** Staff should be actively encouraged to ensure that their staff directory entry is up to date and routine comms will be developed to encourage staff to update and amend this.
4. OPTIONS & ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

4.1 It is established practice for the Cabinet to consider each individual scrutiny committee themed review and to make comments on issues contained within the report.

5. SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY PRIORITIES (AND OTHER NATIONAL OR LOCAL POLICIES OR STRATEGIES)

5.1 The recommendations contained in this themed review report take into account the Council’s priorities and aims to implement those where relevant to the themed review’s topic. The Recommendations will further the Council’s priorities as set out in “Redefined Waltham Forest 2020” to improve customer service by expanding the digital options available to contact and transact business with the Council.

6. CONSULTATION

6.1 The Committee over the course of the review consulted with customer services managers and staff in the Customer Services Centre on issues pertinent to the review topic, and to obtain their views on how the service to the public could be improved further. The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee were given a half day tour of the Customer Services Centre and took the opportunity to consult directly with staff and customers on their experience of the service and to identify areas for improvement. Several recommendations, for example, recommendation 4, “that the staff directory and staff structure chart should be updated on a more frequent basis than at present……” were strongly influenced by feedback gathered from officers.

6.2 Given that the service already makes extensive use of customer feedback, such as satisfaction surveys and secret shopping exercises, and this evidence informed the conclusions reached by the Committee in the themed review report, it was thought unnecessary to carry out new, direct customer consultation in addition to the extensive feedback already available.

7. IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Finance, Value for Money and Risk

The recommendations have been developed so that they can be implemented within the existing budgets available to relevant services.

However, if in preparing to implement the recommendations contained within the themed review report, they are not sustainable within existing resources and officers find that additional expenditure is required, a report should be brought back to Cabinet to explain either: a) why the recommendations cannot be implemented; or b) proposals to finance their implementation.
7.2 Legal

Part of the Council’s constitution sets out the Overview and Scrutiny procedure rules including, in paragraph 6, the procedure for policy review and development. This report has been prepared as part of the annual work programme agreed by Council following consultation with the relevant directors and portfolio lead member (part 6 para.5.1). The procedure rules provide that in carrying out any such policy review or development, Overview and Scrutiny must have regard to available budgets and resources (para.6.2) and make recommendations to Cabinet (6.1.1).

7.3 Equalities and Diversity

The Council must further take into account its wider Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) under s.149 of the Equality Act 2010 when making a decision. The Council will consider the impact of changes that might arise as a result of implementing the recommendations on those with protected equality characteristics, in particular where there is likely to be an impact on residents or service users from any changes to, or decommissioning of existing services.

Several of the recommendations made in the themed review report will further the Council’s equalities and diversity aims. For example, Recommendation 1 calls for the “retention of a portfolio lead member explicitly for customer care”, which will ensure high standards of customer care are experienced by all customers. As well as Recommendation 2 “that each directorate should develop their own KPIs to ensure continual improvement in customer service can be effectively measured”, which will help monitor access to digital services by different socio-economic or ethnic groups.

7.4 Sustainability (including climate change, health, crime and disorder)

As outlined above, the report and its recommendations are expected to have a positive impact on all residents. Sustainability issues will be carefully monitored to identify any adverse effects from the implementation of any of the recommendations. Where a negative impact arises, mitigating action will be taken. The sustainability implications of the recommendations that are adopted should be actively monitored.

7.5 Council Infrastructure

The recommendations that Cabinet is asked to agree are intended to be cost neutral, with a process for referral back to Cabinet if this is not the case. As such the recommendations in the themed review report do not impact on the Council’s transformation programme.
These recommendations will be implemented within existing staffing requirements. If any of the recommendations lead to a need for additional HR resource, further Cabinet approval will be sought.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION (as defined by Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985)

None.