Organisation Scrutiny Committee

07 December 2021

MINUTE EXTRACT

OSC/ 42/2 1-22

Scrutiny Review

Members conducted a series of interviews with Heads of Service to assess the accessibility of the Council's online services.

Interview One with the Projects & Development Manager

1. **What progress has been made towards full digital services?**
   Committee heard that the Projects and Development Manager had worked alongside the Joint ICT Service to develop online forms, contact centre scripts and build websites. They had also supported all service areas with digital transformation.

   Members heard that they had achieved their target goal of 50% digital services in quarter two, the current figure was at 51.19%.

   The Officer informed Members that work was being undertaken to ensure that residents could access information online. The website included one page for all online services such as 101 forms. This also included forms available through Derbyshire County Council (DCC), revenue and planning. The page also contained redirection links to the Parish or County Council if the District was unable to provide the relevant information.

   Committee heard that interest in online services had increased since the start of the pandemic but some residents would still prefer to use traditional methods of communication such as via the telephone or in-person visits.

   Members requested to view a breakdown of this information.

2. **How easy and intuitive are the services we have introduced?**
   Members heard that the services were designed to be as easy and intuitive as possible but residents have different needs and it is not intuitive for all individuals to work online.

   The Council had less control over third party forms, such as those used by revenue and planning, but they provided guidance on these and residents had the ability to phone the contact centre for assistance completing forms.

   The Officer informed Members that they had not received much negative feedback but this did not mean that residents weren't struggling.

3. **How do we promote digital services and how are we measuring the customer experience?**
The Officer informed Members that the Communications department advertised online services wherever possible. Information on what services the Council provided online were also included on the Streetscene newsletter. But residents that viewed this information were more likely to already know about online services. It would be important to find a method of contacting those residents that do not engage with many online services.

The Officer notified Members that customer experience was measured through an annual review but they would be adding a customer satisfaction survey to the end of every form in order to gain increased feedback.

4. **How are we ensuring that all customers can access digital services, and what are we doing to help those who can't?**
Members were informed that all service areas were promoting themselves digitally.

Committee heard that each individual would have different needs and requirements but it would be important to identify those individuals that cannot access online services so that the Council could improve its accessibility.

Members discussed reasons why residents could struggle to access online services and heard that it was younger people, rather than older people, that were becoming less connected through choice.

5. **What are the costs of implementation?**
The Officer informed Members that the cost of implementation would be around £13,000 per annum.

Members were informed that there was no budget in place for digital transformation. Instead it was funded as part of the Joint ICT Service. There was a £2000 software contingency but any other spend had to go through a report first.

Committee heard that the team consisted of a GIS Officer, a Property Gazette Officer, two part time form developers, a web developer shared between three authorities and a software developer. There was a vacant position for a senior application development officer.

6. **What are the barriers to success?**
Members heard that more investment was needed.

Other barriers to success included a high volume of emails received by the department and a lack of customer feedback.

7. **Do you have any other opinions/suggestions to improve digital services?**

The Officer suggested that a "single sign-on system" that gave residents complete access by linking services such as revenues and the Council's self-service, would be beneficial but would include high costs for linking the accounts.

Members noted that consideration could also be given to a centralised and dedicated digital transformation budget, as currently digital transformation came out of individual departmental budgets.

Interview Two with the Customer Services Manager

The Customer Services Manager was unable to attend the meeting.

Interview Three with the Revenues & Benefits Manager

1. **What progress has been made towards full digital services?**

The Officer informed Members that it was important to ensure that residents who could not or would not access digital services were not restricted from those services. But it was also important to provide online services to those that wanted them.

A number of services could now be completed virtually such as online payments; housing benefit, council tax reduction, changing circumstances, council tax, business rates and benefits forms were available online. Residents could contact staff in person or over the phone to receive assistance completing any of these forms.

Residents could have their council tax bill, business rates and housing benefit letters emailed to them instead of posted through the mail. 3176 residents had signed up to view their council tax details online, over 9000 residents had their bill emailed, 189 residents had signed up to receive housing benefit details online, and 25 had signed up to view their business rates bill online. The Officer would like to increase these numbers.

Members heard that the department were advertising a post for progression of digital services.

The Officer informed Members that they would like to introduce a form for residents to inform the Council when they have moved out of the District. They would also like to design a form that could be used for a corporate perspective.

Committee discussed the various forms. In particular they enquired as to the cost and whether certain forms could be constructed in-house.

Members heard that IEG4 forms were around £29,000 per annum and Capita forms were sold as part of a package that cost £15,000 to £20,000

per annum. They also heard that certain forms would be difficult to build in-house as the external forms were intuitive to the Council's database.

2. **How easy and intuitive are the services we have introduced?**
Committee heard that a majority of the online forms were intuitive. If a resident had indicated that they were disabled then they would have different and more relevant questions to another resident that had not.

3. **How do we promote digital services and how are we measuring the customer experience?**
The Officer informed Members that information on digital services were promoted on outgoing bills and had been included on flyers with council tax and benefit letters. It was hoped that once filled, the new post would do more to help promote online services.

The Officer would identify residents that were not signed up for online accounts and email them information around the Council's online services.

4. **How are we ensuring that all customers can access digital services, and what are we doing to help those who can't?**
Members heard that residents could contact the department via telephone and staff would assistant them in completing the forms. There was also a Visiting Officer who could perform home visits.

5. **What are the costs of implementation?**
Committee were informed that the contract with IED4 cost around £25,900 per annum and was set up as a two year contract with the option of extending.

The Council had a rolling contract with Capita. Because Capita had established the initial systems, it was more difficult for other providers to access information within the system.

The Officer informed Members that they were always reviewing services to ensure that they provided the best user experience and assessing whether to use an external or in-house form.

The Officer praised the work carried out by the in-house development team.

6. **What are the barriers to success?**
Members heard that the barriers to success included informing on and encouraging residents to use the online services.

7. **Do you have any other opinions/suggestions to improve digital services?**
The Officer suggested that more advertising should be done at the corporate level to inform residents on the online services offered by the Council.

It was important that the Council did not go completely digital as this would restrict access to residents.

Interview Four with the Service Manager for Environmental Health

1. **What progress has been made towards full digital services?**
   The Officer listed a number of areas where the Council had progressed towards a full digital service. A majority of all front-facing environmental health services, such as pest control, were available online via a self-service portal.

   Environmental Health had invested in a noise app that would allow residents to take a recording of noise nuisance and send it to the relevant officer. The department had also invested in a mobile inspection platform that would allow for a number of inspections to be built up and shared with the relevant businesses. As well as this, certificates and inspection results could all be supplied electronically to businesses.

   New online services included a Covid self-assessment that businesses could complete online, a digital customer satisfaction survey to gauge how effective the food hygiene service had been delivered, and an online licensing application system was due to go live in March.

   Committee heard that they would now be conducting research into mobile survey requests and inspections with the goal of establishing a more intuitive inspection based service that an officer could have access to on a tablet device.

2. **How easy and intuitive are the services we have introduced?**
   The services introduced were designed to be as user friendly and straightforward as possible.

   Customer satisfaction surveys were needed to fully assess how easy and intuitive the services were.

3. **How do we promote digital services and how are we measuring the customer experience?**
   Committee heard that customer experience was not yet being monitored.

   Members were informed that the Covid certification scheme had been promoted during visits to businesses and that the new scheme would be promoted via social media. The website was also utilised and information was marketed through emails.

   Environmental Health had worked with the food standards agency to launch an online scheme. Officers worked with new businesses during visits to help them fill out the form.

4. **How are we ensuring that all customers can access digital services, and what are we doing to help those who can't?**

   The Officer stated that they wanted to ensure that their digital services were easy to understand and access. This was being developed further by sending staff on deaf awareness courses.

   The Officer informed Committee that they would like to see more work completed on disability awareness at a corporate level.

5. **What are the costs of implementation?**

   Members heard that the cost of removing paper and handling time would provide savings but some of the digital solutions were also expensive and so it was important to balance these costs.

   It would be important to role services out wider to allow for other savings.

6. **What are the barriers to success?**

   The Officer suggested that cost was the primary barrier to success. It would be crucial to make the right investments early on for savings down the line.

7. **Do you have any other opinions/suggestions to improve digital services?**

   The Officer informed Committee that they would like to see investment in more digital services that would support people with additional needs.

   The Committee heard that investment in a centralised communications system such as Microsoft 365 could also be considered.