

Cabinet Member Briefing – Councillor Ali, Customer Engagement






Introduction

‘Our Council Plan’ – Priorities

The Customer Engagement Portfolio delivers a wide range of services, it positively contributes to both our Council Plan and We Are Walsall 2040 vision in all areas.

Council Plan		We Are Walsall 2040	
Inequalities are reduced and all potential is maximised.		Walsall in 2040 will be the most improved borough in the region, a vibrant place where people are proud to live and residents in all neighbourhoods have the same life chances.	
People: Encourage our residents to lead active, fulfilling, and independent lives to maintain or improve their health and wellbeing.	X	Thriving and happy: Thriving and happy: By 2040 we will be a borough where all people feel safe, where communities and people do more to help each other and themselves, and children have the best start in life	X
Internal: Council services are customer focused effective, efficient, and equitable.	X	Healthy and well: By 2040 we will be a wellbeing centred borough where people are healthy and live full and active lives	X
Children: Have the best possible start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well.	X	Prosperous and innovative: By 2040 Walsall will be a place that it is easy to get around, where people are confident to access services digitally and the economy works for everyone.	X
Communities: Empower our communities so that they feel they are connected and belong in Walsall, creating safe and healthy places whilst building a strong sense of community.	X	Proud of our borough: By 2040 we will be a borough known for having vibrant clean towns with quality green spaces that we all enjoy, a place where residents and partners take responsibility to respect the environment and are climate ready, and where communities come together to celebrate their heritage and culture	X

We strive to deliver on our Customer Promise to be “GREAT” detailed in our Customer Experience Strategy 2021-2026, this positively contributes to both the Council Plan and We Are Walsall 2040

G	Get things done quickly	
R	Respect our customers and the communities we serve	
E	Excellent customer service, first time, every time	
A	Align the way we work with customers, partners and internal services	
T	Tell people about our services and be clear about what we don't do	

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Summary of key messages by service:

Customer Experience Centre (CXC)

CXC continued to grow in 2023 – Adult Social Care Initial Referral Officers were transferred to the CXC. We have seen improved speed to answer calls and using SMS functionality has improved no show rate for Occupations Therapy clinics.

We have implemented improvements to our telephony system, including call back function to hold a customer's place in the queue. Utilising SMS messaging to customers and improving service e.g. Building Control, halved call volumes by sending proactive messages for inspector visits.

Customer Satisfaction Survey is now enabled, able to send customers a survey proactively. Initial performance is very strong for both Net Promoter Score and Customer Satisfaction metrics.

Establishing a centralised corporate complaints team within the CXC during 2024. Improving quality and consistency of complaints handling across the Council.

Members Enquiries

Implemented the new Members Enquiry application in July 2023, enabling members to raise enquiries directly to services areas.

Further enhancements will be made during 2024 based on member's feedback received.

Benefits

Provided £59million in Housing Benefit payments to residents of Walsall and £960,000 in Discretionary Housing Payments helping to prevent homelessness.

Processing times for benefits applications and change in circumstances remains below the national average in Walsall. 12 days for new applications versus 19 days national average and 1 day for change in circumstances versus 9 days nationally.

Benefits administered £2million of Household Support Fund via application process and direct awards.

Revenues

Billed £166m in council tax and £70.5m in business rates for the 2023/24 financial year.

Created a focussed team to handle telephony enquiries where self-service isn't possible, this has radically improved customer experience. Average wait time from 16 minutes to 3 minutes 30 seconds.

Contacting residents via Email or SMS wherever possible, reducing cost and improving customer experience.

Collection of overdue taxes is done via an informed manner, choosing an approach that provides the best outcome for our residents and the Council. Proactively signposting residents to other support if appropriate.

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Our Service Delivery

Customer Experience Centre including Members Portal

CXC

The Customer Experience Centre has expanded further over the last 12 months with Adult Social Care Initial Referral Officer team transferring to the CXC in July 2023. We have already decreased the number of abandoned calls from 9% to 5% on average month on month and reduced average speed times to answer telephone calls drop from 1 min 39 seconds to 56 seconds.

To further enhance the Customer Experience, we have enabled call back functionality on all service area queues so customers can keep their place in the queue without staying on the line and we also now send out SMS's to customers with information and links to our specific parts of our website. This has particularly benefited Building Control as we have seen call volumes halve by sending out inspection times by text message. We have also seen a significant reduction in no-show rates at Occupational Therapy Clinics which has been really positive for Adult Social Care.

Since July 2023 we also started capturing caller feedback by offering Customer Satisfaction Surveys. These currently are agent led and are offered at the end of telephone interactions. Our current Net Promoter Score is 75 and Customer Satisfaction is 92.41% which is in significantly higher than other Local Authorities.

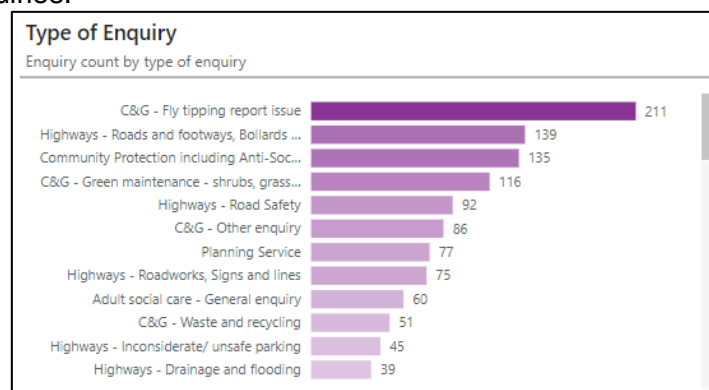
We have started to explore Speech and Text Analytics. We are capturing sentiment analytics on Adult Social Care and Clean and Green to gain further insight into the customer experience by analysing call transcripts to determine if the emotional tone of customer interactions is positive, negative or neutral. We are also using Topic Miner to identify specific phrases to identify trends so we can further understand our resident's needs. This will be rolled out to all other service areas in the coming months.

We have also enabled Work Force Management to increase productivity by automating the allocation of resources to improve efficiency by forecasting workloads and managing schedules.

Members Portal

The Member Enquiries Application was launched successfully in July 2023 and enables Members to independently raise enquiries via their mobile phone or desktop in order to ensure that there is a clear, consistent, and fit for purpose approach to enquiry handling. The application is used by both Members and officers, with the aim of providing a straightforward, transparent, and performance-led process. As at 20th March 2024, there have been 1,399 Members Enquiries of which 66.5% are resolved within 5 working days.

Top Types of enquiries:



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We are continually striving to improve the Member Enquiries application and we hope to see the first phase of technical improvements in July 2024.

Benefits Service

The Benefits Service provides Housing Benefit, Council Tax Reduction, Council Tax Hardship, Discretionary Housing Payments and since the introduction of Household Support fund has supported direct payments and 23/24 application process for customers struggling with the cost of-living crisis, providing additional support to the most vulnerable residents. The team have supported Household support fund phone calls in addition to benefits enquiries. The team have taken just over 24,000 calls this year, a focus since the start of the year to reduce waiting times and abandon rates while ensuring claims are processed has resulted in improvements to our customer service standards, 2024 shows average wait time as 2 minutes 51 seconds and abandon rate of 9%. This has been achieved without any impact on performance by analysing the data to provide extra support during peak periods, whilst providing a new motivation for staff with regards to customer service standards.

The team have provided nearly £59 million in Housing Benefit payments to support Walsall residents with their rental payments. In addition, £960,000 in discretionary housing payments to prevent homelessness. The current Housing Benefit caseload is 10,718, of which 5543 are pensioners, Council Tax Reduction caseload is 26,759. Walsall has planned migration to universal credit for 24/25, this process began this month and will reduce Housing Benefit caseload during this year, creating additional demands from customers in the coming year.

Government set KPI's for the number of days to process Housing Benefit new applications and changes. Current performance is 12 days for new applications and 1 day for changes, the national average is 19 days for new applications and 9 days for changes. A further comparison of the team's performance is demonstrated with a comparison of West Midlands authorities, Walsall consistently has the lowest number of days to process a new application. Highlighting Walsall Benefit's team ensure customers receive the help when they need it.

The team have administered £1 million support for residents through the Household Support Fund application process and direct payments to households in receipt of Council Tax Reduction with children totalling £2,133,065.00 providing additional cost-of-living support to vulnerable customers.

The team have recently received excellent feedback from DWP in our quarterly performance review and received a clear audit from DWP ensuring no financial impact to the Council. The levels of accuracy across the team supports the 10 year plus clear audit record unlike many neighbouring authorities.

The team have a wealth of knowledge and experience providing not only advice for benefits but supporting customers to claim other identified benefits.

Revenue Service

The revenue service are responsible for the billing, collection and enforcement of Council Tax and Business rates. Walsall as over 118,000 properties subject to council tax and almost 8,500 subject to business rates, with the service billing £166m in council tax and £70.5m in business rates for the 2023/24 financial year.

To reduce the level of fraud and error in the system, the service carries out regular reviews of the different discounts, such as, reliefs, exemptions awarded and classification of empty properties. Residents and businesses can use a wide selection of on-line services to notify

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the council of changes and the service continues to extend the range of services that can be done on-line.

For those unable to access our on-line services a new team has recently been set up to improve the level of service to those contacting us by telephone. By adopting the Customer Experience Centre operating model, we have been able to radically reduce the wait time for customers to be able to speak to a staff member. Following 2 months of this revised approach the average wait time reduced from 16 minutes to **3 minutes 30 seconds** and the number of calls abandoned went from 34% to 9%. This team will form part of the CXC formally in the coming months.

The service has been at the forefront of contacting residents by text and email as a replacement to post and the service continues to develop this area to improve the service to resident at the same time as reducing costs.

With the continuing cost-of-living crisis and the demographics of the borough, collection of overdue taxes is done in an appropriate and informed manner. We use financial intelligence to assist in obtaining the best outcome for both resident and council. In addition, the service offers direct links in to local and national organisations for those residents that need more in-depth support.

Our Strategies

We intend to refresh our Customer Experience Strategy (2021 – 2026) and learn from our resident's feedback, to help us to continuously improve access to services, both through enhancing our online presence, but also by offering face to face and telephony assistance for those not able to connect virtually for whatever reason.

Our Projects

HSF

As part of the fourth round of the governments Household Support Fund Walsall Council was allocated £5.6m to administer support to vulnerable households throughout 2023/24. This support could be for assistance with energy and water costs, food, essentials linked to energy and water, wider essentials, housing costs and the provision of debt advice. The support provides was a mixture of pro-active targeted support and application-based support.

The support provided included direct payments to families in receipt of income based council tax reduction, Support through partners, local hubs and food banks, help to replace old and inefficient boilers and other energy related items, support to allow tenants in threat of eviction to remain in their homes, helps to care leavers and families through the council's early help team and the increased provision of debt advice.

There will have been around 35,000 awards individual awards from the fund to around 20,000 of the most vulnerable households in the borough.

The government have announced that the Household Support Fund will continue for a further 6 months from April 2024 until September 2024 with Walsall receiving £2.8 to cover awards and administration. The criteria for awards in the extended scheme remain the same as that for 203/24.

Development of a new Centralised Corporate Complaints Team

In 2023 we developed a revised approach to corporate complaints handling, this review was prompted due to a new Corporate Complaints Handling Code from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and data showing inconsistencies in how we handle complaints

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across the Council. As a result, during 2024 there will be a new arm to the Customer Experience Centre that will handle corporate complaints centrally, aiming to improve customer experience and provide a consistent and professional service to our residents. As part of this work there will be a review of our Corporate Complaints Policy to ensure it is clearly documented and accessible to our residents.

Knowledge Base Development

As part of the development of the new version of the chatbot in the Genesys telephone platform, we are implementing Web Messaging, which will give customers the ability to communicate online with a CXC agent using chat. In order to support staff, we are creating knowledge base articles which will be available to CXC agents to enable them to easily provide answers to questions using 'drag and drop'. We are also planning to produce 'how to' videos that the CXC agents can share with customers. Both of these elements are intended to reduce the amount of typing the agent will have to undertake.

Free School meals

The benefits team are supporting the Free School meals team to take advantage of technology and data already held to maximise up take of free school meals while reducing manual resource requirements to deal with applications.

Thank You

Customer Engagement have worked very hard over the last 12 months ensuring that the services are delivered to our residents across the borough. The staff have worked to deliver new and improved services and continue to work collaboratively with other Council service and external organisations to best meet the needs of our residents. I would like to thank all the staff that have contributed and continue to contribute to the initiatives that have been delivered across the service area.



Signed



Cllr Ali
Portfolio Holder for Customer Engagement
27.03.2024