

RESOURCES AND SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

3 DECEMBER 2020

REPORT OF DEPUTY LEADER, PORTFOLIOHOLDER FOR CORPORATE FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

A.2 UPDATE ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF DIGITAL CUSTOMER SERVICES

(Report prepared by Mark Westall)

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this report is to update the committee on the progress made towards the digitising of Customer Services.

BACKGROUND

The Chairman of the Resources and Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested on 25th August 2020 that members of the Transformation Project Board should provide the committee with an update of the progress made.

This report details the developments and improvements that have been achieved in the delivery of customer services, paying particular attention to digital progress and technology use.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Customer Service provision at Tendring District Council has undergone significant change in the last two years. Three sets of people from different services have been brought together to create the physical customer service team and a new reception area has been created at Pier Avenue to give residents a welcoming place to visit. The reception area includes a number of digital kiosks where our customers can self-serve if they choose.

The digital offering for our customers has also seen significant changes. Originally online services were delivered through forms that then needed massive intervention from our back office staff. They were only useful for gathering information and were not a true end-to-end digital solution. Now our customers have just one place they need to visit online, 'My Tendring', where the aim is to allow customers to complete transactions at the time of their choosing from the comfort of their own homes, without the need for any intervention from our teams. It is the very fact that we had made such progress in this direction that has stood us in good stead during the Covid-19 pandemic when our residents have been more insecure and the number of incoming enquiries has more than doubled.

Although work on the My Tendring platform will be ongoing as we continue to add services and processes, we have already begun to see savings in terms of the customer service agent's time. The project is running a little behind its original time plan as resources were drawn away for Covid-19 related projects, however the original scope will be delivered on budget and we have developed the in-house skills of the project team so that they are able to continue the progress of the platform once the external consultants leave us.

DETAILED INFORMATION

During 2015 it had become clear that there was an ever increasing demand from customers that TDC should endeavour to provide a myriad of services online, 24 hours a day. This would benefit both those customers that work Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm and so cannot access other customer contact channels, and those that now prefer the convenience of digital access. Therefore a Channel Shift Strategy was devised and adopted by the Council 22 January 2016 with the statement that:

In order to meet the needs of customers, Tendring District Council must provide services that are:

- Easily accessible
- Simple to use
- Streamlined
- Convenient
- Cost effective
- Robust

In essence the Channel Shift Strategy was the roadmap to delivering services with little or no interaction from our staff.

In early 2016 the process of looking at the range of options available to TDC began. It was evident that there also needed to be a Customer Service Strategy that would inform the way we interacted with our customers; we would not stop providing other contact channels such as telephone and face-to-face.

The Customer Service Strategy was adopted on 16th December 2016 with the vision statement "Tendring District Council will deliver an excellent service to all of its customers, both internal and external, from all of its points of access and across multiple channels. Staff will be well trained and motivated, and excellence will be measured against key performance indicators". To create the Customer Service team to handle telephone, email and face-to-face enquiries we drew together members of Environmental Administration, Housing Repairs, Switch Board and Revenues & Benefits front office.

External consultants, Intergence, were employed to further assess the marketplace with regards self-service portals. A shortlist of possibilities were drawn up in terms of meeting our needs and value for money and finally the product from Firmsteps was selected.

The Digital Transformation project, which included the Customer Service element, was initiated on 16th Feb 2018 "to provide greater online services for customers, making it easier and more efficient for them to interact with the council", and the My Tendring self-service platform was installed during August of the same year.

The Transformation project set out a number of key deliverables including:

- Environmental services report-it functionality (missed bins, garden waste)
- Council tax enquiries
- Benefits enquiries
- Licensing applications and renewals

It was clear that it was not practical to fund consultants to do all of the computer scripting and that our ambition should be to use the consultants to grow our own in-house capabilities so that we can continue to add services to the portal after the external resources have left the project.

The Customer Service project and the funding, originally £306,000, was broken up into three smaller pieces (worktrains) which were to have a pause and time for learning reflection between each phase.

Worktrain one focussed on understanding the Firmsteps platform, looking at some of the component blocks that would be in many of the processes such as calendar integration and payments, creating the My Tending accounts, and beginning to develop the garden waste process.

Worktrain two continued these themes and we began to use our newly learnt in-house capabilities to create more simple forms and processes.

Worktrain 3, which is nearing completion, would see the final key services delivered, and in addition, a suite of analytical and reporting tools. These reporting tools were not originally in the scope but it became clear that they would provide a valuable insight into customer behaviour and service performance. The cost for this extra piece of work would be £35,000 and would come out of the original budget.

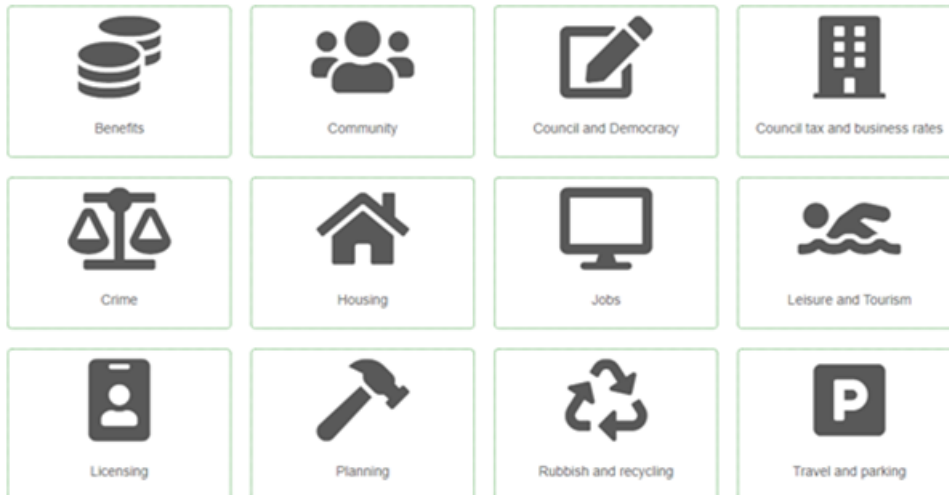
It is true to say that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a detrimental effect on the Customer Service element of the Transformation project. Timeframes have slipped as our valuable IT resources have been refocussed onto projects with more immediate need such as the track and trace power app. In the meantime though the team members have continued to learn, and also to release more and more useful forms for our customers (both external and internal). In terms of deliverables we have completed 74% of the original specification that was detailed at inception.

Current situation – My Tending portal

Over the past 18 months we have seen telephone calls into the Customer Service centre rise dramatically. Firstly last summer with the roll-out of 70,000 wheelie bins and the associated changes in the recycling service and then more latterly with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Undoubtedly the option for many residents to use the My Tending self-serve portal has been of great benefit to them.

My Tending

Access council services and get updates on issues you've raised and more...



An up-to-date list of all processes currently available through the My Tending portal is available at appendix 1 as is a list of those processes that are nearing completion. On the portal, the resident can also find access to a whole range of other services in one place as shown above. It makes it very easy for the customer to navigate and this has proved to be very popular.

Self-serve stats dated end October 2020 (since May 2019)

Customers with a My Tending account: 10524 (24.2% of all Tending households if one account per household).

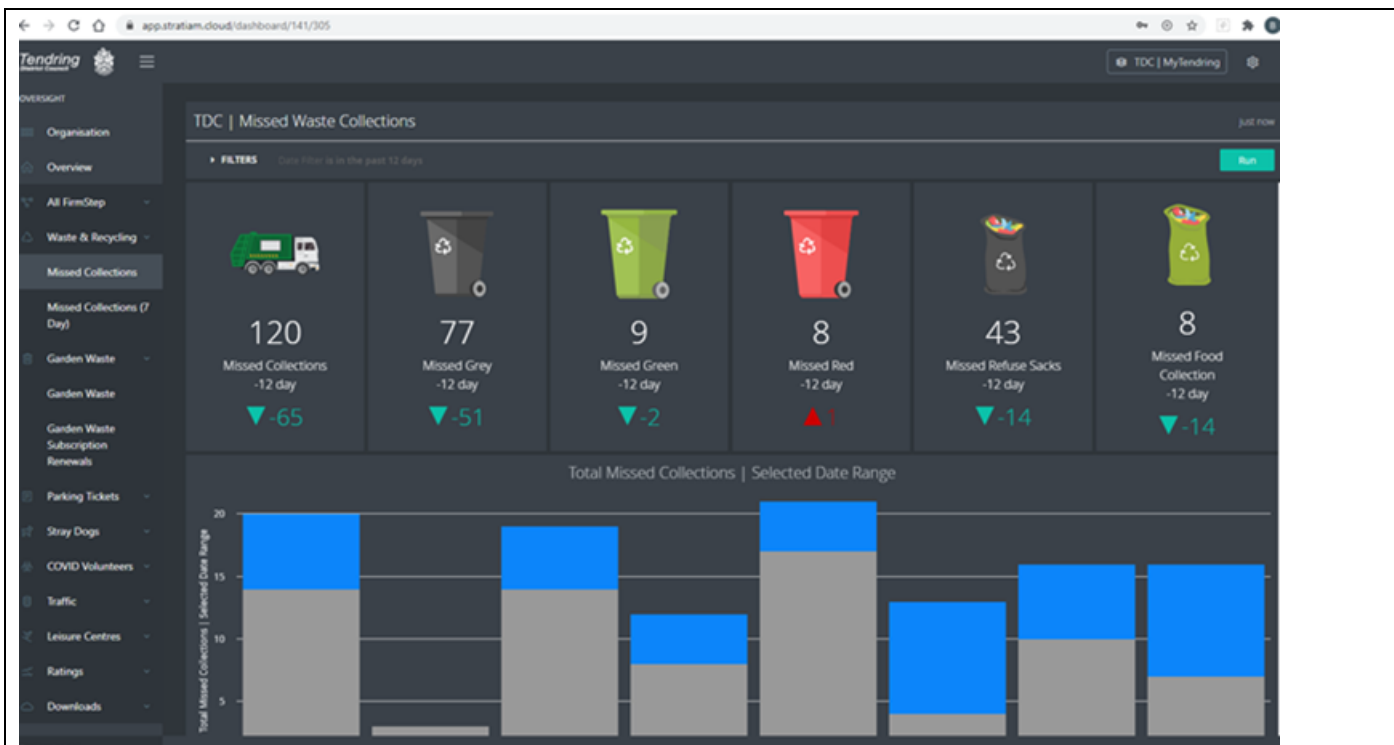
Forms produced: 16,361

Satisfaction from May 2019:

5 stars	63%
4 stars	20%
3 stars	8%
2 stars	3%
1 star	6%

All users of My Tending are asked if they would like to rate the portal and leave a comment. You will see that since its inception in May 2019 83% have rated it as 4 or 5 stars. Upon interrogating the data we can see that of the 6% 1 stars, many people are actually commenting on the recycling frontline service rather than the portal. All negative comments regarding the self-serve process are used as a learning tool so that we can improve the offering.

In terms of budgets, of the original £306,000 that was set aside for the production of the My Tending portal, we have spent £281,000, however £30,000 of this was spent on producing the suite of analytical and reporting tools.



As can be seen in the above graphic, the platform is very flexible and we now have the ability to drill down into each incoming form that is filled in, so for example, in the case of missed bins we can look at instances by town or even by road to see if there are recurring problems. This will be very useful during performance meetings with external contractors. This flexibility of interrogation is available across the whole suite of forms.

Savings to date

The spreadsheet below illustrates the efficiency saving that the My Tending portal has made within the Customer Service Environmental team. A total of 1924 hours have been saved in the year October 2019 to October 2020 as residents have self-served. This equates to 1.14 FTE that would otherwise have needed to be staffed.

TIME COMPARISONS FROM 9TH OCTOBER 2019 UNTIL 9TH OCTOBER 2020				
New Process	Time to complete (Minutes)	Processes since 09/10/2019	Savings per process	Saving (seconds)
Garden Waste New Subscription	00:03:00	807	Saving of 17 minutes per process	823140
Garden Waste Renewals	00:02:02	149	Saving of 12.58 minutes per process.	11622
Missed Waste	00.01.19	4025	Saving of 41 seconds per process	165025
Old Process	Old time to complete (Minutes)	Total time to complete	Comments	
Garden Waste New Subscription	20 minutes	00:20:00	CSA's only took the customers details and sent them through to the back office.	
Garden Waste Renewals	15 minutes	00:15:00	This was all back office.	
Missed Waste	2 minutes approx	00:02:00	All CSA's	
Customers who Self Served	Amount	Savings per process		
Garden Waste New Subscription	4171	20 minutes		5005200
Garden Waste Renewals	730	15 minutes		657000
Missed Waste	2214	2 minutes		265680
Total of self serve	7115			
			Total savings (seconds)	6927667
			Total savings (Hours)	1924
			Total savings (FTE)	1.14

Current situation – Customer Service Centre

As stated earlier, telephone calls into the Customer Service team have more than doubled in the last 18 months. At one point during summer 2020 each customer service agent needed to complete the work relating to 80 enquiries every day. There were also telephony issues relating to Skype meaning that some calls were dropped if all agents dealing with Environmental issues were already on a telephone call.

As we were not able to deliver the customer service excellence that we would expect to, action was taken. We increased the number of customer service agents by 3 FTEs (1 permanent and 2 temporary). We will monitor performance over the next few weeks so that we can ascertain if we have enough resource now to handle the demand, and also to try to understand if the current high levels of incoming calls will become the new normal.

We have also installed a completely new telephony system, Five9s. Originally this wasn't available to all customer service agents but extra licenses have been purchased and all incoming calls now go through this system rather than Skype. Five9s also allows customers to request a call-back rather than hold for an agent to become free. This will have the effect of reducing call wait times and also allow customer service agents to manage call volumes successfully. Again, Five9s comes with a raft of reporting tools and we will be able to understand trends in volumes and staff our customer service team accordingly.

The Future

Within the next few months we will complete the roll-out of self-service processes relating to Council Tax, Benefits and Taxi Licensing. Along with Recycling, these are considered as having the biggest impact for our residents. When these services have gone live we will commence a media campaign so that we can channel shift more people away from our customer service centre and towards the self-serve portal, thus looking to reduce the need for human resources.

We will also begin the process of seeking permissions to correspond with our customers via digital means rather than by hard copy which is far more expensive. The Print and Post hub have the technology to be able to send digital correspondence to email addresses rather than produce letters which will have saving attached to it.

We shall look at implementing customer service excellence standards for both our people and our online self-serve portal. We shall roll-out the satisfaction surveys to both face-to-face and telephony contacts and by benchmarking ourselves against both other local authorities and commercial organisations we can set ourselves some excellence targets to attain.

Lastly we shall look at further technology, such as Chat Bots, to see if other efficiency savings are available. We will fully explore the capabilities of the Five9's call handling platform in order to release other technology and processes that will increase the productivity of the customer service team. We are aware that many local authorities are utilising Artificial Intelligence to provide responses to their residents yet without the need for additional staffing. It is certainly possible that we could see the customer service team grown to encompass the frontline interaction for other council services.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee determines whether it has any comments or recommendations it wishes to put forward the relevant Portfolio Holder or Cabinet.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1.

List of self-serve processes currently available through the My Tending portal:

Garden Waste New

Garden Waste Renewal

Report a missed waste collection

Waste collection days

MyTending project request

Street name signs

Covid 19 Community Volunteer groups

NNDR support grant fund

HR Character Reference

HR Employment Reference

Pavement Licence

Private Water Supply

Garden Waste Admin Form

Production line nearing completion

Taxi licensing

Council Tax

Stray dogs

Benefits information

NNDR

Rents