

Minutes

FINANCE AND CORPORATE SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

18 July 2023



Meeting held at Committee Room 5 - Civic Centre

	<p>Committee Members Present: Councillors John Riley (Chairman) Wayne Bridges (Vice-Chairman) Kaushik Banerjee Kishan Bhatt Narinder Garg Stuart Mathers (Opposition Lead) Raju Sansarpuri</p> <p>LBH Officers Present: Louise Forster (Head of Customer Access) Suzie Horn (Head of HR) Dan Kennedy (Corporate Director of Central Services) Liz Penny (Democratic Services Officer) Rebecca Reid (Democratic Services Apprentice)</p>
11.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Gursharan Mand with Councillor Raju Sansarpuri substituting.</p>
12.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>There were no declarations of interest.</p>
13.	<p>MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting dated 21 June 2023 be approved as an accurate record.</p>
14.	<p>TO CONFIRM THAT THE ITEMS OF BUSINESS MARKED AS PART I WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THAT THE ITEMS MARKED AS PART II WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE (<i>Agenda Item 4</i>)</p> <p>It was confirmed that all items of business were in Part I and would be considered in public.</p>
15.	<p>DIGITALISATION OF THE CONTACT CENTRE (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p> <p>Dan Kennedy, Corporate Director of Resources, and Louise Forster, Head of Customer Access, presented the report to the Select Committee.</p> <p>Members heard that Hillingdon was committed to being a digital-enabled, modern, well-</p>

run Council. Since its launch in 2021, new technology had been introduced to support residents with their use of My Account. It was reported that 40% of contacts were now handled with new technology. The next phase of development would cover three areas – waste, housing repairs and social care.

Members were advised that the contact centre had access to a wealth of information regarding resident contacts; this information was being used to create a more efficient and digitally oriented service. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) had been brought in to pull together 28 different stories that could be digitalised, and My Account would be centred around these stories covering all services. It was acknowledged that this was a challenge as the contact centre received some 15,000-16,000 calls per month and had recorded 1700 different reasons for calls in 2022 alone.

It was confirmed that the Council had worked with PWC to introduce Amazon Web Services (AWS). The first service for which AWS had been introduced was Housing Repairs as this service received the highest volume of calls. PWC had led the project with input from contact centre staff and the first AWS service had gone live in November 2022. Under the new system, residents were asked why they were contacting the Council and, where possible, a response would be provided or a link to the online system to enable the resident to report the issue. If residents could not access the online system, they would still be given an option to speak to someone in the contact centre. Following the successful introduction of the AWS system for Housing Repairs, the new AWS system had now gone live for all Council services. As a result of these changes, contact centre staffing had reduced by 17 posts.

Members were reassured that support would be provided to residents experiencing difficulties with the technology or with setting up My Account. The offer of support was also being rolled out in libraries and the aim was to provide a wrap-around support service to encourage residents to adopt the new approach. Councillors welcomed the introduction of support services in libraries.

In response to questions from Members regarding issues encountered by residents and how these were addressed, it was confirmed that now was the time for reflection and review. Emergency housing repairs calls were directed immediately to an agent while routine queries could be dealt with online. It was recognised that residents sometimes failed to speak hence technology was being explored to manage the silence and give people options. The contact centre had an assisted list of people who consistently struggled with the system and these residents would be automatically passed to an agent. Moreover, AWS was being updated to recognise some of the specific vocabulary regularly used by residents such as 'Locata'.

In response to further questioning, Councillors were informed that the AWS system could identify and channel similar requests; for example, if a query related to heating, the system would ask for a postcode and direct the caller to the correct company accordingly. Members heard that housing repairs used direct labour in addition to support contractors and specialist service contractors. The system was being enhanced to ensure calls went directly through to the appropriate department/company.

Members sought further clarification regarding the systems in place to deal with an emergency or cyber-attack. It was confirmed that the Council used 'Anchor' to provide a contracted out of hours service. Anchor took the calls when the contact centre closed and provided back up if the systems went down for any reason.

Councillors enquired how the AWS system helped those with disabilities or a language need. Members were advised that, if the system failed to understand someone, the call would be passed through to the contact centre. The option of inputting individuals into the AWS system so they went directly through to an agent was being explored. In respect of language barriers, it was confirmed that a translation / interpreter service was available in the Council, but people often asked a family member or friend to help them when making a call. A translation service through AWS was being considered but there would be a cost involved.

In response to Members' questions, it was confirmed that a live chat bot system was already in place to assist people online. Artificial intelligence technology was also being explored. Councillors were advised that the Council was keeping an open mind about providers noting that it was important not to be dependent on or locked in to one provider.

Further information regarding waiting times and the number of abandoned / redialled calls was sought by Members. The option of a survey at the end of the call was suggested to obtain feedback from residents. In response to this, Members were informed that the AWS system answered all calls immediately. It was confirmed that call numbers had decreased since the introduction of the AWS system and waiting times had reduced to approximately four minutes. The aim was to encourage the majority of residents to go online when possible so the contact centre agents could take calls from the more vulnerable residents.

The Committee Members heard that the new system had been successfully stress tested prior to implementation in November 2022. Contact centre staff were responsible for building the forms and adding them to the website hence these could be updated as required. Dynamic messaging ensured messages were kept up to date.

Given the reduction in library opening times and cost of living pressures, Councillors sought clarification as to the contingencies in place to ensure inclusion. It was confirmed that support through community groups and workshops was available for those who lacked confidence or required assistance with technology. This would be kept under review.

Members noted that it would take time for residents to become accustomed to the new system and recognised the importance of assistance provided in libraries. A continuous programme of public education was essential.

Members were invited to visit the contact centre on a site visit at a convenient time.

RESOLVED: That the Finance and Corporate Services Select Committee noted the update set out in the report to improve the resident experience and efficiency in meeting needs, using new digital technologies.

16. **DIGITALISATION OF THE COUNCIL'S HUMAN RESOURCES FUNCTION** (*Agenda Item 6*)

Suzi Horn, Head of HR, presented the report to the Committee. Members heard that, following a restructure in 2022, the HR department now had two separate subject matter specialist teams – one dedicated to HR matters and one to recruitment. The HR department aimed to be digital by default, but the current systems did not interface with

each other which was challenging. It was confirmed that, over the summer, the Learning and Development system would be upgraded to enable it to interface with the HR system.

Councillors were informed that Resourcelink was to be optimised to make it more efficient. Recruitment was a key area of focus, and it was important to raise the profile of the employer brand.

In terms of HR operations, it was confirmed that approximately seven queries were received from each staff member every year – officers were exploring the nature of these enquiries and aimed to introduce changes to free up officers' time thereby enabling them to work on other matters.

In relation to the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, the Council aimed to ensure the workforce was representative of the Borough. A culture in which people felt a sense of belonging and were heard was vital to staff wellbeing.

In response to questions from the Committee, it was confirmed that the fundamental HR structure was now in place, but some tweaks would be required going forward. It was important to take staff on a journey and raise awareness as to how they could self-serve and interact differently with HR in the future. A culture change was needed to enable the HR Department to operate at full capacity. Some progress had already been made – previously 800 staff members had been receiving paper payslips – this number had now reduced to 30.

Members enquired how this culture change could be achieved more quickly and effectively. Councillors were informed that HR were engaging with CMT, and the message was being filtered down from the top. Changes were being introduced in the way HR engaged with managers; it was important for the HR team to advise managers how things should be done and support them through the process. Lean and operational excellence was striven for in order to reduce waste.

Councillors sought clarification in respect of turnover figures and what was being done to retain staff and explore why people left the Council. It was confirmed that attrition was currently 14% which was not considered too bad. An exit questionnaire was being re-introduced to establish reasons for leaving. 'Stay' interviews were also proposed to ascertain what motivated people to stay in their jobs. Open conversations with employees were important and managers should not shy away from having those conversations. An employee engagement survey would be completed in 2023 to obtain staff feedback.

Members noted that, in the corporate world, HR tended to be more proactive than reactive. They sought clarification regarding employee incentives and mediation in Hillingdon. In response to this, the Committee heard that, in the Council, HR attempted to resolve issues in the workplace by informal means using work-based mediators.

The importance of giving managers the skills and confidence to manage employees who were underperforming was noted although it was recognised that these were difficult and uncomfortable conversations.

With regards to recruitment, Members enquired how the Council ensured it recruited good-quality candidates. It was acknowledged that recruitment was a challenge, particularly when recruiting staff in the areas of social work, planning and the trades.

	<p>Changes to recruitment processes were required as the current system was administration heavy. Attempts were being made to move to talent acquisition via the likes of LinkedIn and the importance of recruiting good staff with the right skillset was being highlighted to managers. Members were informed that the Council had some way to go in terms of proactive data analysis around annual leave, contracted hours and support for staff.</p> <p>In response to Members' questions regarding temporary and permanent staff, it was noted that some temps and casual staff preferred not to have permanent contracts. The option of flexible contracts would be explored further.</p> <p>Attention was drawn to the scope for home-grown talent recognising that many members of staff had progressed and moved to different departments within the Council. There were good examples of staff who had progressed from junior to senior roles and it was important to celebrate these success stories. Members heard that apprenticeship programmes were being explored as were graduate and internship programmes.</p> <p>It was noted that the Select Committee hoped to look at HR as a review topic in the future.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Finance and Corporate Services Select Committee noted the contents of the report and provided comments to officers as appropriate.</p>
17.	<p>CABINET FORWARD PLAN (<i>Agenda Item 7</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Cabinet Forward Plan be noted.</p>
18.	<p>WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 8</i>)</p> <p>HR was suggested as a possible review topic for the Select Committee. It was noted that implementation of the planned changes would take some time, but it was thought to be a topic worthy of consideration– areas to focus on would include home working, direction of travel and what success will look like.</p> <p>Councillors were keen to visit the contact centre and it was agreed that a site visit would be added to the work programme.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That a site visit to the contact centre be added to the Work Programme and that the Work Programme be noted</p>
	<p>The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 8.25 pm.</p>

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Liz Penny on epenny@hillingdon.gov.uk. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.