

People O&S TFG on Customer Services Scoping Paper

What is the issue?

Digital access is increasingly central to how residents interact with local authorities. Brighton & Hove City Council has adopted a clear direction of travel towards digital channels, self-service and integrated customer accounts through initiatives such as:

- MyAccount as the council's single customer account
- Ongoing development of online services and digital customer journeys
- Investment in customer contact technologies
- Use of digital tools to support service delivery
- Greater use of data and digital services across the organisation.

The BHCC Council Plan includes a priority to be “a responsive council with well-run services”. Developing a better digital offer for customers is a key part to delivering this priority and to achieving efficiencies which are integral to the successful delivery of the Council’s Medium Term Financial Strategy.

The key strategies supporting this shift are the Customer Experience Strategy and the Digital, Data and Technology Strategy (DDaT). Moving to a ‘digital by default’ model of customer service has the potential to deliver services more cost-effectively and also to better meet customer needs.

However, both the Customer Experience and DDaT strategies recognise that digital exclusion remains a significant issue. The Customer Experience Strategy specifically identifies digital exclusion as a key challenge, noting that some residents lack internet access, digital skills or accessible technology. The strategy commits the council to providing support, equipment, alternative access routes and staff training to assist digitally excluded residents. The DDaT Strategy highlights the need to ensure all resident groups benefit from digital technology while maintaining a customer-centred approach. The strategy promotes digital solutions but explicitly recognises that vulnerable residents may require tailored support and alternative routes to services.

The core question for a customer services TFG is to ask **“how effectively is Brighton & Hove City Council ensuring that residents who are digitally excluded can access services and opportunities, and what improvements are required to support an inclusive digital future?”**

Key Lines of Enquiry

Understanding the Scale of Digital Exclusion – what proportion of the city population is digitally excluded? Which groups are most affected? How is digital exclusion measured, and is there a shared definition of digital exclusion used across the council and with key local partners? Does the council fully understand the barriers that some groups of people face in accessing services? How does the council measure success in enhancing digital inclusion and reducing digital exclusion?

Digital Inclusion - What measures is the council taking to support people to use digital services, and how successful have these measures proven?

Digital Exclusion - What is the council's customer service offer to people who are unable to use digital services? Does this offer meet the varied needs of city residents, particularly in terms of people with protected characteristics? How confident is the council that the shift to digital has not led to disengagement by vulnerable people who need support, particularly people with relatively easy to address needs that will become hard to address crises without intervention?

Face-to-face services – The council has recently redesigned face-to-face support to focus resources in libraries. How successful is this initiative proving and how will it evolve? Is there a danger that reductions in face-to-face options mean we pick up fewer problems at an early stage? How accessible is our face-to-face offer for people with protected characteristics? Does the council have a coherent position on phone services?

The digitally reluctant – a significant percentage of local people may be able to use digital services, but are reluctant users – because they have limited digital skills or access, would rather talk face-to-face, because they believe council digital services are poorly designed etc. What is the council doing to encourage digital use by the digitally reluctant? What is the council doing to ensure that customer experience of digital services is a positive one? How is the council managing reputational risk associated with negative customer experience of digital services?

Partnership – how effectively does the council work with local public sector and VCS partners to ensure that approaches to digital inclusion and exclusion are aligned and that good practice is shared? How does the council work with VCS partners to maintain in-depth understanding of the barriers that particular communities face?

Best practice – what is the council doing to ensure it learns from good practice from other places, given that the shift to digital is nationwide?

Potential Witnesses

Witnesses could include Cabinet Members; BHCC officers responsible for customer service, IT&D, equalities; BHCC officers responsible for services with high volumes of customer contact (housing, ASC etc.); city public sector partners which interact with vulnerable people (e.g. NHS Integrated Care Board); local VCS partners including advice providers and organisations representing vulnerable people; best practice local authorities (potentially including Leeds CC, Camden LBC, Manchester CC).

Outcomes

The TFG will make detailed recommendations. These will be presented to People Overview & Scrutiny Committee, and if approved by the committee, will be referred to Cabinet and/or partners for consideration. These will be determined by the evidence received and cannot be predicted in advance. However, in terms of broad outcomes the TFG will seek to:

- Give elected members a better understanding of strategic thinking underpinning the council's digital shift and the work to reduce digital exclusion and enhance digital inclusion
- Gain assurance that the council has robust plans in place to support people who cannot readily access services via digital
- Gain assurance that the council is effectively managing the reputational risks associated with delivering poor or hard to use digital services
- Gain assurance that the council's approach to delivering face-to-face support and advice is effective and evidence-based
- Learn from best practice local authorities and public sector partners who have adopted innovative approaches to digital inclusion or exclusion
- Develop better links with key VCS partners across the city
- Gain assurance that the council will continue to evolve and improve its digital and face-to-face offers as the digital economy continues to grow and evolve.

