

East Herts Council Report

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 14 January 2025

Report by: Councillor Joseph Dumont, Executive
Member for Corporate Services

Report title: Digital Exclusion

Ward(s) affected: All

Summary

- The paper provides information on our approach to digital services and how we currently accommodate those who are digitally excluded.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

(A) Committee Members consider information herein and make any recommendations to the Executive in regard to digital exclusion.

1.0 Proposal(s)

1.1 That Committee Members consider information herein and make any recommendations to the Executive in regard to digital exclusion.

2.0 Background

2.1 In March 2022 Committee Members discussed digital exclusion in the district and made two recommendations to Executive on the issue:

- that a policy objective should be that, whilst the Council was encouraging as many people as possible to use online services, the Council should permanently make allowances and arrangements for people who were not able to access

digital services and that the Executive should be advised of this.

- Officers look into the potential for maximising the number of digital interactions and maximising the use of e-accounts. The Head of Service provide metrics detailing online activities and a conversation be had regarding phone systems going forward and Officers progress the introduction of a centralised CRM system.

2.2 Committee Members have requested an update on progress and five questions/ lines of enquiry have been provided for officers to review. Each are dealt with in turn below.

2.3 **(1) Whether the council has any evidence pointing to progress made on the actions above. Specifically, we would like to consider any statistical evidence showing the % of transactions that are digital compared to paper/in person to help us assess the effectiveness of the policy.**

2.4 Figure 1 in the appendix shows the proportion of overall contacts to customer services received via different channels since 2021 (also included is a pre-covid baseline, taken from the final quarter of 2019/20). Numbers are also provided in Figure 2.

2.5 Telephony remains the overall contact channel of choice for our customers, traditionally representing around two out of every three contacts. However, it is worth noting an increasing number and proportion of digital contacts since the Autumn of 2023. In December 2023 and January 2024, digital contacts were higher than telephony contacts for the first time ever. This can in large part be attributed to the introduction of Granicus, the Council's CRM system which was deployed in the Summer of 2023.

2.6 The Granicus system is now used by customer services to record and monitor the majority of first points of contact (face to face, webform and telephony). This provides us with much more insight than previously. Before the system was introduced, each contact was effectively treated as new (eg. it was entirely possible for a customer to ring up twice on the same day and for customer services not to be aware it was a second contact). Granicus

enables us to create individual customer accounts that record contact history and reasons for doing so. This allows us to check any relevant case history rather than having the customer repeat information or be passed around service areas trying to find who they may have spoken to earlier. Since the launch, over 11,000 customer accounts have been created.

- 2.7 An equally noticeable change has been face to face contact. Pre covid this represented over 10% of all contact however has been steadily reducing to less than 2% (equating to around 100 – 125 people coming into receptions every month).
- 2.8 A number of other key service areas also provide a useful proxy for progress towards digital transformation. Figure three shows the percentage of households that have signed up to online council tax billing/ account management and the percentage of landlords that have signed up to online business rates' billing/ account management. As the figure shows, steady progress has been made with 25,000 out of 67,000 households currently handling their council tax accounts online. Businesses opting to handle their business rates' online is lower at 575 businesses out of 5000 choosing to do so.
- 2.9 **(2) How the profile of interactions between the council and residents have changed since the council's transformation project started with the shift to online services.**
- 2.10 A useful indication of the profile of interactions is to look at face to face services. As per paragraph 2.8, both the numbers and proportion of contacts have reduced via this channel. Figure 4 shows how the reasons for visits have changed in recent years.
- 2.11 Traditionally people seeking support or help with housing benefit or council tax queries have always been the largest share of contact. However, in recent years this has gone from representing just over 50% of all visits to almost 90%. Alongside this, contacts for housing and planning have reduced significantly. Parking has also reduced however still represents around 10 – 15% of all contacts. Typically, this is residents coming to obtain hard copies of the parking vouchers. Although these are available online, the hard copy vouchers can be bought in smaller units (e.g. Blocks of

'hours' instead of whole days) and in the case of dispensations can be changed between different vehicles. This level of flexibility is not available online. We know there are a small number of customers who have regular visits by carers (sometimes professionals but also shared amongst family members) where this level of flexibility is required. Equally, there are some residents who simply cannot or do not wish to use the online permit system, permitsmarti.

- 2.12 To some extent we would expect the decreasing face to face planning and housing contacts to have been off-set by an increase in the appointment based, call back offer. For planning that is the case with, on average, over 100 call backs booked per month. Planning is a highly digitised service in any case, with virtually all applications being submitted online. We receive around 20 – 30 hard copy planning applications per year. These all come from the same planning agent who has been active in the district for some 50 years. Figure 5 shows the number of appointments by service type.
- 2.13 The planning call back service is essentially an additional offer for residents who wish to receive free, general advice from a planning officer. Unsurprisingly, for a district which receives a lot of household level planning applications, this is a popular service.
- 2.14 However, call back appointments for housing and benefits have remained steady at around 5 – 15 per month. They have not increased as face to face contacts for the same services have decreased. This may indicate there is simply less overall demand for these services or that people are opting to do more online. The number of people who do receive housing benefit and have an on-line account has increased from a baseline of some 100 users in 2017 to almost 900 users in November 2024 (out of around 5000). Interestingly this puts the proportion of residents who use the online benefits service as higher than the proportion of businesses who use the online NNDR account management service.
- 2.15 However, it is also the case that although fewer people are visiting receptions, they generally require more intense support and assistance. There is then some evidence to suggest that people visiting are those most in need and that customer services'

activity is becoming more naturally targeted at the vulnerable.

- 2.16 Another useful proxy is the Choice Based Lettings System (Locata) which allows people to on the housing register to bid for properties. This system is entirely online and bids from people on the housing register can only be made through the system. There are only a handful of residents who come in to receptions to access the system via the public PCs or call in for support.
- 2.17 **(3) What steps if any has the council taken to address digital inclusion across East Herts with respect to its own services**
- 2.18 The Council continues to offer 'walk in' contacts for customers at Wallfields, Hertford, 10:00 – 14:00 on Tuesdays and Thursdays; and Riverside, Bishop's Stortford, 10:00 – 14:00 on Wednesdays and Fridays. Alongside this phones are available to customers 09:00 – 17:00, Monday to Friday. Appointments ("call backs" for housing, planning and benefits and face to face for licencing) can be booked over the website. Sometimes these are also booked over the phone on behalf of customers.
- 2.19 This provision ensures we have an alternative offer for residents who are unable or reluctant to engage with us digitally. As per (1.16) reception services do generally support people in need of assistance who are unable or unwilling to go online. The only exception would be in regard to some types of parking vouchers which are not available online.
- 2.20 The council also commissioned digital inclusion workshops through Age UK (Hertfordshire) between April 2023 – May 2024 as part of the cultural strand of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. This was aimed at supporting people in rural areas build confidence with use of smart devices (particularly with things like facetimeing family members). 37 people were supported over a number of workshops and 12 devices were distributed to socially isolated individuals as part of this work.
- 2.21 As part of the "Listening Council" approach, active steps have been undertaken to ensure that key consultations include face to face engagement alongside online surveys. In the Old River Lane Public Square consultation, five opportunities were provided for

residents to meet with Councillors and Officers to discuss the proposals. These took place on Market Stalls on Thursdays and Saturdays between August – September 2024. A consultation on the future of parking provision also included sessions in each of the five main towns and Stansted Abbots in the Autumn of 2024. In both instances, residents were positive about the level of engagement undertaken even if they were less keen on some of the proposals being put forward.

2.22 **(4) Whether there are any council services that are not currently provided online that could be**

2.23 Our challenge is not so much about availability of online services. With the exception of some type of parking vouchers, all service requests can be done on line and we currently have over 80 types of service request forms available on our website. We have two major challenges as, follows:

2.24 Fragmented systems: Currently if a resident opts for online council tax billing, also wants to have a green waste subscription and pay for a residential parking permit, they need to access three different systems (each requiring a separate log on). The overall customer experience in this instance is understandably poor. The CRM will enable us to link all of these systems through one customer account, vastly improving the customer experience. Integration with these different systems is a priority for the next phase of the CRM project.

2.25 Customer behaviour: As mentioned above, telephony remains the most likely means by which customers contact us. Although there has been an uptake in digital interactions, our aim is to shift more contacts from telephony to digital.

2.26 Benchmarking digital activity levels against averages is a useful way to understand what is reasonable in terms of customer behaviour. Key data sets on digital exclusion at a national level comes from [OFCOM's affordability tracker](#) and the [Lloyds Banking Group Consumer Digital Index](#). These indicate that exclusion is caused by both a lack of access to digital (9% of adults cannot afford a mobile device, 8% cannot afford broadband at home) and a lack of skills/ confidence to do so (16% of the adult population)

- 2.27 LG Inform, who undertake benchmarking of various metrics amongst local authorities also have some [interesting research on digital inclusion](#), broken down by local authority level. Their research states that in East Hertfordshire, 96.2% of adults had used the internet in the last 12 months (slightly higher than the regional average of 93.9%). Interestingly, engagement with public services online (eg. Libraries) is less than the regional average (13% in East Herts compared to 15% elsewhere) but engagement in other activities such as online news was higher (71% compared to 61%).
- 2.28 Although the LG Inform metrics have acknowledged limits (not least that the responses are collected via an online survey), it does suggest that the overall proportion of contact we receive through digital means could be increased. Although the reports do not adjust for local circumstances, demographics or geography (the LG Inform also notes that East Herts is below the average for access to full fibre availability) a reasonable target to set for future interactions is for 66%, or 2 out of every 3 contacts to come via digital means.
- 2.29 **(5) Whether there are any examples of best practice across local government that East Herts could learn from**
- 2.30 There is lots of good practice on digital engagement nationally across the public and private sector. The [Local Government Association's Digitisation Framework](#) provides a useful guide to the steps that need to be undertaken when thinking about digital inclusion. We are also involved in the [LGA's Digital Inclusion Network](#) which helps share best practice and case studies.
- 2.31 There are also some good examples of digital work in specific areas. The most innovative areas recognise that digital inclusion is a collective challenge across agencies and work in partnership to address this. Authorities such as [Middlesbrough Council](#) and [Shropshire Council](#) have collaborated with community groups, volunteers, other public sector agencies and businesses to address affordability and skills.
- 2.32 **What are our priorities going forward**

2.33 We will continue to develop the CRM for customer services and beyond. Specifically:

- Integration with key software systems such as Uniform (Planning, Environmental Health and Licencing) and Echo (Waste Management)
- Implement fully automated workflows so that customers can track how their queries are progressing (and avoid the need to follow up with another email or phone call for an update)

2.34 Alongside this we will be reviewing our overall strategy with regards to customer services. This will include refreshing service standards and expectations for responses and considering whether some form of customer service accreditation is feasible. This work will be delivered through the Transforming East Herts programme.

2.35 The current budget proposals also include a review of receptions with a potential saving in 2026/27. Our expectation is that by this time we will be able to deliver more efficiencies through increased take up of the CRM. This will follow on from the work described in (1.35).

2.36 Further work from 25/26 onwards will also include the implementation of a new telephony system which will integrate with our CRM. This will be procured jointly with Stevenage Borough Council through the shared IT Service.

3.0 Reason(s)

3.1 Committee Members have requested this issue be discussed.

4.0 Options

4.1 N/A

5.0 Risks

5.1 N/A

6.0 Implications/Consultations

6.1 At this stage there are no consultations required however should the council wish to develop its policy position on digital exclusion further, engagement with residents will be required.

Community Safety

No

Data Protection

The CRM involves creation of individual customer accounts. The software system was subject to a Data Protection Impact Assessment to ensure it was compliant with all data held being necessary and proportionate.

Customers are able to access their own accounts if they choose to do so.

Equalities

Should the council wish to develop its policy position on digital exclusion further, an equalities impact assessment will be required. In the case of any changes to existing provision, an impact assessment will be required however no changes are proposed within this paper.

Environmental Sustainability

No

Financial

No

Health and Safety

No

Human Resources

No

Human Rights

No

Legal

No

Specific Wards

No

7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

7.1 Appendix A – background data and metrics

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