

**IT WORKING GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN on 1 OCTOBER 2008 at 7.30 pm**

Present:- Councillor S Howell (Chairman).
Councillors R M Lemon and D J Sadler.

Officers in attendance:- R Auty (Head of Community Engagement), P Evans (Business Improvement and Performance Manager), S Martin (Head of Customer Support and Revenue Services), R Procter (Democratic Services Officer), A Webb (Interim Director of Central Services) and N Wittman (ICT Manager).

ITWG7 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor J Hudson.

ITWG8 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 4 June 2008 were received and confirmed by the Chairman as a correct record.

ITWG9 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute ITWG6 – tracking Members' enquiries

The Chairman wished to raise during the meeting the issue of tracking Members' enquiries. The Interim Director of Central Services said the whole issue of complaint management was under consideration.

ITWG10 TELEPHONE CALL HANDLING

The Head of Customer Support and Revenue Services gave a summary of the current customer service strategy. It had been envisaged that the majority of telephone calls would be resolved at first point of contact, but integration between computer systems was a barrier. Handling face to face contact had been surveyed and was shown to be very successful. Whilst the Customer Service Centre was resolving most enquiries relating to council tax and environmental services, other enquiries could only be dealt with to a limited degree.

It was now apparent that changes to the telephone system were needed, and Officers had therefore met to assess how to modify the Council's telephone call handling arrangements. Customer feedback had also to be taken into account. The initial conclusion reached by Officers was that a 'self service' approach should now be adopted, with customers initially selecting a service using their telephone handset, following which they would be routed to a skilled or multi skilled customer service advisor. Accordingly the views of members of the Working Group were now sought.

In reply to questions from Members, the Interim Director of Central Services said that a specification for Siemens to alter the telephony was being prepared, with a timescale before April 2009. The Business Improvement Team would also be represented on the project team. Customer service staff

would receive training to enable them to respond to customer contacts as skilled or multi-skilled advisors. The aim would be to reduce the number of calls on the 510 number. Direct numbers to specialist advisors would be published.

Members expressed disappointment that the CRM system had not worked as planned. They were concerned that automated routing would entail delay or frustration for customers.

Councillor Sadler said that people generally disliked automated telephones. It seemed different numbers would simply be substituted for 510 calls, but the main priority was to route the calls correctly.

Councillor Lemon was disappointed that more expenditure on the system was contemplated. He considered it would be better to get the original system working properly, rather than modify it at a cost.

The Interim Director of Central Services said the proposal was in fact the lower cost option, compared to what could be £100,000 of potential costs to get the technology working as originally intended. Staff training would also be required.

Councillor Lemon said he had been part of the decision to install the system. It was disturbing to now find there must have been a miscalculation of the amount needed.

In conclusion, the Group accepted that in order to move forward, modification of the telephone system was unfortunately necessary. The costs of changing the system's specifications should be explored in further detail. Automated routing for callers using the 510 number should be kept as straightforward as possible.

AGREED that Officers prepare a report for the next meeting on proposals for modification of the telephone system, to enable the IT Working Group to make recommendations to the Finance and Administration Committee.

The Chairman went on to say that it was important to have in place a protocol for following up Members' enquiries. The Interim Director of Central Services said that there was an existing protocol. As the Business Improvement and Performance Manager would be looking into the identification of Members' queries in detail, he would propose to bring a report on this issue to the next meeting. The Chairman asked that the protocol be circulated to the members of this group.

ACTION a report on a protocol for dealing with Members' enquiries to be brought before the next meeting.

ITWG11

BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT TEAM UPDATE

The Business Improvement and Performance Manager gave a verbal update on implementation of BI reviews. It was important to conclude this process in

order to gain costs efficiencies. The appropriate frequency for subsequent reviews was being assessed, and status reports were being provided to SMB.

In response to questions, Officers reported that within Democratic Services, improvements were being implemented, including cross training for specific areas of work. Within Planning, a report was to go to SMB, with recommendations already discussed with both John Mitchell, as former Director of Development, and with Roger Harborough, Acting Director of Development. There had been good involvement of staff in coming up with recommendations through a series of workshops, which should provide positive support when introducing the changes.

Within the Post Room, the problems with TNT had to a great extent been resolved. Officers were considering involving Post Room staff in checking for inadequate address labels. Regular TNT reviews continued to be held with the TNT account manager and relevant staff.

In reply to a question from the Chairman, Officers said that costs savings had been achieved. A report giving details was awaited from TNT and the data would be included in a future Business Improvement and Performance team highlight report.

Regarding the Print Room, it was noted that since the early retirement of the supervisor in April, costs had been reduced. This was in part due to the deletion of that salary, and also due to the efforts of staff in making efficiency savings. Paper use across the authority had also been reduced.

Members congratulated the Business Improvement Team on the work they had carried out, which was certainly achieving savings in many areas.

Following a question from the Chairman, a brief update on the staff suggestion scheme, U Suggest, was provided by the Democratic Services Officer, as the scheme's co-ordinator. Only a limited number of the ideas which had come through could be implemented, and costs savings had therefore not been extensive. Feedback from SMB following a recent report on the scheme indicated that many good suggestions were made by staff who did not submit their ideas through U Suggest. It was important to consider how appreciation could be shown to all staff making constructive suggestions, and further work was being done on this aspect.

ITWG12

WEBSITE UPDATE

The Head of Community Engagement provided a verbal update on the new website. The launch had taken place in July in difficult circumstances. Due to the departure of the former website officer on short notice, elements of the website were incomplete. The launch had also unfortunately coincided with the planning IT system going down, but as it was not possible to update the previous website, the decision had been taken to proceed. Most discrepancies had now been addressed.

Members appreciated the difficult circumstances of the launch, and congratulated the Head of Community Engagement on the appearance of the

new website. Thanks were due also to Jo Simpkin, whose excellent contribution had been noted.

Councillor Sadler drew attention to certain pages within the Committee section of the website, which appeared to be out of date or unused, such as reference to decisions under committee headings. These references should be deleted if they were not used. The Head of Community Engagement explained that these pages sat within the CMIS system, rather than the core website and CMIS would be reviewed in the future.

The Head of Community Engagement then reported on the recruitment of James Burton, who would take up the post vacated by the Website Development Officer on 20 October. The Interim Director of Central Services said that the opportunity had been taken to widen the post to include a communications role. Free training had been offered by VerseOne, the company which designed the website, on the Spearhead Content Management System.

The Chairman said this was a good outcome, and that once a final update had been brought to the next meeting, there would be no further need for this Group to receive website reports.

ITWG13

GOVERNMENT CONNECT

The ICT Manager presented a report on the implications of a central government initiative, Government Connect (GC). GC was now under the control of the Department for Work and Pensions, which had effectively mandated its use from April 2009. Whilst GC would only be used by the Housing Benefit service to access essential data from the DWP, the entire authority would have to satisfy the requirements of the Code of Connection. Significant work would be needed to implement the requirements across the council. Estimated costs of implementing the project were in the region of £30,000, but this figure could increase significantly if certain implications for remote working were confirmed. There would also be an ongoing 'health check' which would cost approximately £3,000 annually.

In reply to questions, Officers stated that objections to these onerous requirements had been raised jointly via the Essex IT Partnership. However, it seemed there was no option but to comply. Accordingly, Officers were of the view that it would be better to implement the work now, as the services of consultants were likely to be greatly in demand as the deadline approached.

In conclusion, the Group noted the report and asked that objections continue to be raised with central government.

ITWG14

ICT SECTION AND WORKLOAD UPDATE

The ICT Manager reported on recent recruitment, which would bring the staffing levels within the department to a more satisfactory level. Regarding the blade project, Dell had been asked to re-quote, and the figures had come down significantly. Work was continuing on the revenue server, and all current server upgrades would be up to date by December. An upgrade

would eventually be required for the housing server. Budgets for this were in place, and with staffing levels improving, the situation was satisfactory.

Regarding the finance and BACS systems, progress was being made. Regarding car parking cards, hardware was awaited from the suppliers. As part of the compliance for the Code of Connection, a single firewall would replace the two existing firewalls. There would be some costs upfront, but there would be savings as there were no ongoing costs.

The Chairman thanked Officers for a positive report. He asked whether other groups or committees were willing to conduct their meetings using electronic documents. Officers were aware of only one other, the Scrutiny Committee, but explained that meetings of SMB and Heads of Division also used IT. The Chairman said he was keen for this practice to be encouraged.

The meeting ended at 9.05 pm.