

Update on progress of Access to Service Review

Final Decision-Maker	Communities, Housing and Environment Committee
Lead Head of Service	Angela Woodhouse, Head of Policy, Communications and Governance
Lead Officer and Report Author	Orla Sweeney, Equalities and Corporate Policy Officer Anna Collier, Policy and Information Manager
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

Executive Summary

This report provides an update on the progress of the Access to Services review being undertaken by the Task and Finish Panel appointed by the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee.

Purpose of Report

Noting

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

1. To note progress on the Access to Services Review and emerging recommendations as detailed in Appendix 2.

Timetable

Meeting	Date
Communities, Housing and Environment Committee	6 April 2021

Update on progress of Access to Service Review

1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	<p><i>The four Strategic Plan objectives are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure • Safe, Clean and Green • Homes and Communities • A Thriving Place <p>We do not expect the recommendations will by themselves materially affect achievement of corporate priorities. However, the review will support the Council's overall achievement of its aims through the delivery of a final report and recommendations.</p>	Head of Policy, Communications and Governance
Cross Cutting Objectives	<p><i>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heritage is Respected • Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced • Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved • Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected <p>The report supports the achievements of 'Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced' and 'Deprivation and Social Mobility are Improved' cross cutting objectives by proposing actions which support their delivery.</p>	Head of Policy, Communications and Governance
Risk Management	Please refer to paragraph 5.1 in the report.	Head of Policy, Communications and Governance
Financial	The proposals set out in the recommendation are all within already approved budgetary headings and so need no new funding for implementation.	Policy & Information Manager

Staffing	No current implications but the proposed recommendation would be delivered within our current staffing.	Head of Policy, Communications and Governance
Legal	Accepting the recommendations will help fulfil the Council's duties under the Public Sector Equalities Duty. Failure to accept the recommendations without agreeing suitable alternatives may place the Council in breach of Equality Act 2010.	Policy & Information Manager
Privacy and Data Protection	No current implications but accepting the recommendations will increase the volume of data held by the Council. We will hold that data in line with our retention schedules.	Policy and Information Team
Equalities	The recommendations do not propose a change in service therefore will not require an equalities impact assessment.	Policy & Information Manager
Public Health	We recognise that the emerging recommendations will have a positive impact on population health or that of individuals.	Policy & Information Manager
Crime and Disorder	No impact identified.	Policy & Information Manager
Procurement	No impact identified.	Policy & Information Manager

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Following a Councillor request made to Communities, Housing and Environment Committee to revisit the Access to the Council's Services for disabled people Overview and Scrutiny Review carried out in 2006, it was agreed by the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee that a Task and Finish panel would be formed to review Access to Council Services.
- 2.2 The Access to Services review was scoped and agreed by the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee. It outlined three key areas for review: Digital Accessibility, Communications and Buildings (the physical environment).

- 2.3 Five members of the Committee put themselves forward to form the Task and Finish panel, Councillors Burton, Mrs Joy, Mortimer, Powell and Mrs Rose.
- 2.4 Members agreed a complete calendar of meetings (Appendix 1) at the outset which set a clear direction and enabled progress to be monitored.
- 2.5 Through the series of meetings so far, the panel have gained a firm understanding of what accessibility means to the Council, where it is performing well, the challenges it faces and the work it still needs to do in order to meet the needs of our residents. The panel are gathering an evidence base by selecting officers and expert witnesses to inform them on each topic and this is underpinned by research and best practice.
- 2.6 The pandemic and the impact this has had on resident's ability to access Council services has been an explicit consideration and concern of the review so far and will remain so as lockdown restrictions are lifted, and we enter a recovery phase.

Digital Accessibility

- 2.7 The first of three meetings on Digital Accessibility took place on 7 September 2020. The panel were tasked to evaluate the accessibility of the website for users, the services provided and the way in which digital processes support frontline services delivered by Customer Services in the Link.
- 2.8 The first meeting focused on website accessibility and was arranged before the deadline for EU Government and EU accessibility targets for public sector websites on 23 September 2020. This was to ensure that the Task and Finish panel had an opportunity to fully understand the challenges and the work that was being undertaken, at a point where they could have a meaningful input.
- 2.9 A presentation was given by Gary Hunter, Transformation and Digital Services Manager, and Ethan McDowell, Digital Services Officer, which outlined the legislation and regulations the Council are now required to meet and how they had achieved this.
- 2.10 The panel were impressed by what had been achieved, and the full implication of what an accessible website meant in terms of ensuring the Council's services and content could now be used and understood as widely as possible.
- 2.11 However, they were concerned about how this standard would be maintained and how the principles and processes for ensuring that website content and documents produced by Officers across the Council were accessible.
- 2.12 The second meeting on Digital Accessibility included a presentation by Gary Hunter, Transformation and Digital Services Manager, Paul O'Grady, Digital Services Team Leader, and Carly Benville, Senior Business Analyst.

- 2.13 The presentation provided the panel with an overview of the Council's website and its evolution to date.
- 2.14 Members were informed that there were now over 100 services available online, and statistics for 2019/20 showed that there had been 1.4 million visits to the websites, and online payments totalling approximately £18 million were received.
- 2.15 The panel felt that Councillors as a whole were not as well informed as they could be about the availability of services online and would like Councillors to be better equipped to inform residents of ways to access services other than in person or by telephone. It was recognised that this route was preferential to many residents and businesses.
- 2.16 The third meeting focused on Digital Inclusion and included a presentation by Gary Hunter, Transformation and Digital Services Manager, and Paul O'Grady, Digital Services Team Leader.
- 2.17 The panel were given an overview of what it means to be Digitally Included and the detrimental impact of digital exclusion. The barriers and the types of groups that were likely to be most affected were also considered.
- 2.18 The panel considered the local picture and how that compared with the national picture. They were updated on the work that the Digital team were doing with local partners and a recent survey that has been undertaken by KCC libraries.
- 2.19 The panel identified that information on digital inclusion needed to be readily available to residents in terms of signposting to resources. The panel were supportive of a webpage but felt that this should be complimented by an article in Borough Insight that would reach all households. It would help inform them as well as directing them to the support available. Launching a webpage without this backing would be counterintuitive to the issues faced.

Communication

- 2.20 The Panel have progressed to the second phase of the review – Communication. They are tasked with reviewing the Council's communication channels to understand their purpose and use.
- 2.21 This phase of the review will involve a series of three meetings, covering the Council's Corporate Communication channels, Council Services (an evaluation of all points of access and where this information is publicly available) and a session with all Councillors which will be informed by a pre survey on the role Councillors play in terms of communication.
- 2.22 The first meeting was held on 8 March 2021. Involve were invited to attend to inform the panel on its Service Level Agreement with the Council which includes running a number Community Group Forums and maintaining a repository of Community Groups.

- 2.23 Communication and engagement are fundamental to ensuring the Council's services are accessible to its residents. The services provided by Involve assist it in its ability to communicate widely, particularly with harder to reach groups, and provides a two-way communication channel between the Council and its residents and wider community.
- 2.24 The panel's experience of working closely with resident and community groups during the pandemic reinforced the importance and need for the Community Group Repository to be as complete as possible and reviewed on a regular basis.
- 2.25 It was identified that the current Community Group Repository provided by Involve was incomplete. Therefore, the Policy and Information team have undertaken a piece of work to incorporate all organisations from a number of lists held by the Council as part of its recent work on the Community Hub. The Involve list has already been developed into a more meaningful database that identifies the ward that the organisation or group is in and whether or not this is parished or non parished.
- 2.26 The next meeting of the Access to Services Review will focus on the Council's Corporate Communication channels to understand their purpose and use. This will include all methods that the Council utilises to reach its residents; from billboards to social media, banners on the website to press releases.

Conclusions and next steps

- 2.27 A number of valuable recommendations are beginning to emerge, and the Panel have identified a number of actions that can be progressed as it continues to gather evidence and evaluate its findings. These are detailed in full at Appendix 2.
- 2.28 As outlined above, the panel will continue to explore Communications and supporting workstreams are already in progress. Surveys, for example, are in the process of being designed as a method of gathering evidence on the options for communication individual services provide to customers and where this information is available (i.e., in a letter, on a webpage etc). A survey is also being designed to understand the way in which ward Councillors communicate with residents.
- 2.29 The review will then move on to consider Buildings. The physical access of Council buildings will be subject to COVID-19 restrictions.
- 2.30 The Task and Finish panel will also have the opportunity to revisit Digital Inclusion as part of a revision to the Digital Strategy.
- 2.31 Regular updates will be provided to the Committee prior to a final report and recommendations.
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3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

- 3.1 This update report details the progress being made on the Access to Services review. The decision to undertake the review was made by the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee. The review forms part of the Council's Equalities Action Plan. It is essential that the Council responds positively and demonstrates through its Equalities Action Plan. Not reporting progress on the review would reduce the Council's formal activities to meet its Equality Duty.
- 3.2 The Council could decide to do nothing, this course of action is not recommended because the Council has a legislative responsibility under the Public Sector Equality Duty.
- 3.3 Note the progress of the Access to Services review to enable the organisation to continue to improve on the way in which it fulfils the Public Sector Equalities Duty.
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4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 To note the progress of the Access to Services review and emerging recommendations detailed in Appendix 2.
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5. RISK

- 5.1 The report is an information report, providing an update on the progress made on actions agreed by Committee. The emerging recommendations made are natural next steps to workstreams already being undertaken by the Council. They have arisen from the sessions held by the Task and Finish panel in which they have acted in the capacity of the 'critical friend' – raising the profile and complementing streams of work that have already been agreed.

6. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

None.

7. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

None.

8. REPORT APPENDICES

- Appendix 1: Access to Services Review Calendar of Meetings
 - Appendix 2: Access to Services Review Recommendations
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9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None