

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNTY HALL, CHELMSFORD ON 22 MARCH 2011

Membership

G Butland	*	G L Mitchinson
* W J C Dick		J W Pike
* N Edey	*	Mrs I Pummell
C Griffiths	*	J Roberts
* M C M Lager (Vice-Chairman)	*	A Turrell
* M J Mackrory	*	T C Smith-Hughes (Chairman)
* Mrs V Metcalfe	*	R Walters (Substitute for A M Hedley)
* G W McEwen (Substitute for M J Page)		J A Young (Vice-Chairman)

(* present)

The following officers were present in support throughout the meeting:

Mrs Hannah Cleary, Governance Officer
Mrs Vivien Door, Committee Officer

20. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from the following Members:

Apologies

Councillor G Butland
Councillor C Griffiths
Councillor A M Hedley
Councillor M J Page
Councillor J A Young

Substitutions

Councillor R Walters
Councillor G W McEwen

21. Declaration of Interest

Councillor M C M Lager declared a personal interest as a Member of Improvement East in relation to item 6 – Transformation Programme Scrutiny Review: Progress Report.

22. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 February 2011 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

23. Matters Arising

At the last meeting (15 February, Minute 15) Councillor Smith-Hughes had asked for clarification of the commencement date for the removal of escorts in relation to Home to School Transport, and had received further information in relation to this enquiry from the Cabinet Member. Councillor Castle, Cabinet

Member for Education and 2012 Games was undertaking a review of the transport routes, consultation feedback on 30 March and with decisions being taken for individual cases if there was an exceptional need for an escort to remain. Relevant parents would be informed about the decisions prior to the Easter holiday, with removal of escorts taking effect from 26 April 2011.

Members **agreed** that the action points from each agenda item are to be included at the end of each minute.

24. Transformation Programme Scrutiny Review: Customer Interface Development

The Committee considered report ES/014/11, a scoping document that set out the focus of the review into Customer Interface Development, with Councillor Jeremy Lucas, Cabinet Member for Heritage, Culture and the Arts and Mr Andy Fairchild, Director for Customer Service, in attendance to give a presentation and answer questions.

Mr Fairchild provided the Committee with the statistical information that had been requested to learn about the impact of the new website on call volume at the Contact Essex call centre, the promotional tools that had been used to raise the profile of the new website, results of user satisfaction surveys and details of the new self-service facilities.

Mr Fairchild advised the Committee that between November 2010 and February 2011 the website had received 1.8 million page external user views, an increase on the total page views for the same period in 2009/10 of 179,000 (11%). A number of seasonal trends of web page views have already been identified such as the viewing of school term dates during the summer holidays and school closures during periods of bad weather.

The Council had been hosting a number of 'micro-sites' that in some cases were costly to support and did not receive many visitors. Some sixty-five of these had been migrated or deleted, resulting in financial benefits of £50,000. A further seventy-seven sites had also been identified for future transition.

One of the original objectives when designing the new website had been to condense the number of web pages from 5,000 to 1,000. This target had been exceeded with the number of pages reduced to 800, resulting in a reduction of circular navigation for customers and had made it easier for staff to identify out of date and inaccurate information.

There had been a dramatic reduction in the level of feedback from customers, although user satisfaction had increased by 8%; a faster rate than for other Local Authorities who had seen a 5% reduction. February 2011 had provided the highest level of positive satisfaction results recorded to date. As dissatisfied users were more likely to leave negative feedback the results demonstrated a positive trend.

A number of small but focused key promotional activities had been undertaken in order to raise the profile of the new website with an overall aim to generate more homepage visits and were largely run through adverts on Facebook, Google, Essex Gazette website and via the 'NorthCliffe Network' (placing advert on sites such as the Daily Mail and This is Total Essex). These adverts, running mainly between November and January, were viewed 27 million times, greatly increasing the visibility of the site. Additionally these campaigns generated 7,300 visits to the site. Promotional bookmarks sent for distribution within secondary schools that directed students to a 'help with homework' page, increased visits by 88% between December and January. The new site and its features had also been referenced throughout the latest edition of the EssexWorks magazine that was sent to over 600,000 households in March. In addition, hard to reach groups including those for whom English is not their first language had been targeted through the use of Facebook groups.

The Contact Essex centre had recorded a new promotional 'hold' message to advertise the features of the website that had been played to callers throughout November and February. In addition, over 70 percent of the information contained within the information database used by Contact Essex (Infobase) had been uploaded to the website for customers to access.

Internal promotion of the website had been undertaken by internal communications who had engaged with a variety of employee groups using a full range of channels including a news story on the intranet home page, information in the Chief Executive's Blog, articles in two staff magazines and email communications. The Internal Communications Team has recently begun communications to further update employees on the next stages of the website, including the transition of micro-sites.

As part of the New Ways of Working Programme, the next phase of the website project will incorporate more opportunities for customers to self-serve, providing more information and functionality, increasing the number of transactions that take place online. Future functionality will include an events calendar, a comments section, online payments for one-off events and courses, a frequently asked questions loop to allow the contact centre and web team to provide up to date information in response to new situations, making major publications accessible in electronic format and enabling Blue Badge applications to be made.

The Council was currently awaiting the accessibility results of the site's compliance, although following self-assessment key groups had been identified to assist in identifying future enhancements to the site's accessibility and inclusiveness to a wider audience, including the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and investigation of the requirements necessary to obtain the Surf Right accreditation.

Further work will be undertaken to identify the impact that the new website may have on calls to the Council, although recent comparative data suggests that the level of calls to the Contact Essex call centre have remained broadly

the same. The Committee noted that the centre had recently taken on responsibility for Country Park bookings and an increase in highways calls due to the poor weather in late 2010. It is likely to take 12 to 18 months to build up a detailed picture of the impact of the website on the method customers use to contact the Council ('channel shift'). However, there had been a 25% drop in call volume regarding 'waste information' and a 26.6% drop in calls for library related enquiries.

Councillor Pummell praised the new site and had received compliments from constituents who had found it easier to use and suggested that it would be beneficial for making the public aware of any changes to services.

Councillor Metcalfe asked if the Council was aware of the number of Essex residents that had access to the internet and if usage was encouraged at libraries. Mr Fairchild explained that approximately 80% of Essex residents had access to the internet and library staff had been trained to assist customers to use the internet.

The Committee expressed concern at the number of publications distributed in hard copy and the associated cost of producing and sending such documents. The Committee **recommended** that publications should be made available in electronic format and only sent out in hard copy upon request. Mr Fairchild assured the Committee that a review of this issue formed part of the New Ways of Working Programme, and Councillor Lucas **agreed** to take up the issue and report to a future meeting.

Councillor Edey explained that he had found some elements of the website difficult to access including the meeting agendas and reports section.

Councillor Mitchinson asked if there were any plans to develop an Essex County Council 'application' for use by 'smart-phones'. Mr Fairchild informed the Committee that the website could already be accessed through mobile phone networks and such an 'application' would require careful consideration through the construction of a business case to ensure there were clear benefits for such an investment.

Some Members of the Committee informed the Cabinet Member that they were experiencing difficulties due to their mobile devices being barred from making telephone calls. Councillor Finch, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and the Transformation Programme **agreed** to consider the matter.

The Committee **agreed** that a progress report would be brought to a future meeting.

Councillor Smith-Hughes thanked Councillor Lucas and Mr Fairchild for attending.

Action Points:

1. That the recommendation for publications to be made available in electronic format and only sent out in hard copy by request be sent to the relevant Cabinet Member and brought back to a future meeting.
2. That Councillor Finch agreed to consider the difficulties experienced by Members due to mobile devices being barred from making telephone calls.
3. That a progress report in relation to Customer Interface Development will be brought to a future meeting.

25. Transformation Programme Scrutiny Review: IT Modernisation and Cloud Computing

The Committee considered the oral report on the IT modernisation and Cloud Computing presented by Mr John Varney, Interim Chief Information Officer and Councillor Finch, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and the Transformation Programme and report ES/015/11 a draft scoping document that set out the suggested areas of focus for a future scrutiny review.

Mr Varney explained that the Council had set out a vision for the future provision of IT services and the procurement of Cloud Computing in order to balance the differing priorities relating to costs and technological advances. The vision was to create an 'adequate' system that would provide the best service at a cost the Council could afford, with a modern structure that would be lean and flat. At present there were 230 staff employed by the Council in IT related posts, and it was envisaged that this would reduce to 25 or 30 staff in the future. In 2008/09 the Council spent £28 million on IT services and it was envisaged that this would be reduced to £8 million by 2013/14.

The concept of Cloud Computing had begun in the 1960s and some of the large IT companies invested significantly to build enough capacity in their systems to allow the sharing of the Cloud infrastructure and servers that offered a pay-per-use facility. This was beneficial to the Council as it enabled financial savings and reduced the need to renew costly software licences, and would inherently allow improved mobile working for staff. Councillor Finch added that Cloud Computing also enabled the utilisation of software that was compatible with existing systems and free to use, thus making further savings.

Mr Varney explained that whilst Cloud Computing offered a range of benefits for the Council it was not a complete solution. The security of data was an important factor for consideration as the Council was responsible for the conditions under which data is stored, with statutory requirements for the storage of personal and sensitive data. Cloud Computing allowed more opportunities for staff to take advantage of mobile and home working. Whilst Cloud Computing allowed savings to be made, the current procurement regulations were not supportive in enabling the Council to change providers speedily in order to take full advantage of daily price variations. The Council was lobbying Central Government to facilitate an amendment to the procurement regulations to make them more responsive.

Councillor Mitchinson asked about the risk of unauthorised and inappropriate use of data stored on Cloud Computing servers, and if there was the potential for the Council to become overly reliant on one service provider. Mr Varney explained that there would be a secure log on process for authorised users and that anti-trust legislation was being strengthened to avoid monopolies.

The Committee **agreed** the following amendments to report ES/015/11:

1. That the cost and procurement elements of Cloud Computing are added to the 'issues to be addressed'
2. That other users of Cloud Computing in both the private and public sectors are invited to give evidence to the scrutiny review.

Councillor Smith-Hughes thanked Councillor Finch, Mr Varney for their attendance and as Mr Varney was leaving next week he was thanked for his work in Essex.

26. Transformation Programme Scrutiny Review: Progress Report

The Committee considered and agreed report ES/016/11 by the Governance Officer.

It was **agreed** that an interim report containing the Committee's findings and recommendations for the Transformation Programme Scrutiny Review would be brought to the next meeting.

Councillor Smith-Hughes thanked Mrs Cleary for her report.

27. Transformation Programme Report-External Auditors

The Committee noted report ES/017/11 containing the findings of an External Audit review of the Transformation Programme, referred by the Audit Committee at its 13 December meeting (minute 80). An excerpt of the minutes from this meeting was included as report ES/018/11, along with an updated scoping document for the Transformation Programme Scrutiny Review: Shared Services topic as report ES/019/11.

The Committee noted that the report contained recommendations in relation to partnership working and that improvements had been made in this area since publication. Councillor Finch explained that Councillor Martin, Leader of Essex County Council had joined the Essex Leaders Group and had improved partnership working with District and Borough Councils. Councillor Finch added that the Audit Commission Report was pleasing as it recognised the hard work that the Council had undertaken in this area.

28. Forward Look

The Committee considered and **agreed** report ES/020/11 subject to the following additions:

1. That the Chairman and Vice-Chairmen would meet to prioritise the topics on the Forward Look.
2. That new topics would be considered for addition to the Forward Look at the April and May meetings.
3. That the Transformation Programme 'Target Operating Model' be brought to a future meeting.

4. That the Scrutiny Board considers the work already undertaken by other Policy and Scrutiny Committees in relation to the Target Operating Models for services in their respective remits.
5. That the future arrangements for undertaking scrutiny reviews in relation to the governance of commissioned services be considered.
6. That the process for conducting Equality Impact Assessments is considered by the Committee.

29. Date and time of next and future meetings

The Committee agreed the meeting dates scheduled for 2011/12 and noted that the next ordinary meeting was scheduled for Tuesday, 26 April at 11.00 am or later, on the rise of the Cabinet meeting, in Committee Room 2.

There being no urgent business the meeting closed at 12.00 noon.

Chairman
26 April 2011