

South Lakeland District Council
Council
23 March 2021
Customer, Commercial Services and People
Portfolio

Portfolio: Cllr Phillip Dixon

To work with all Members, the community and organisations in developing and implementing locality working, case management, and specialist services as part of the Council's Customer connect programme.

Delivery of the Council Plan objectives in relation to quality of service and high performance culture.

The organisation of the Authority relating to the Council's central services, including Employee relations.

Providing and maintaining parks infrastructure.

Polices, plans and strategies

- Parks and Open Spaces Strategy
- Customer Charter and Contact Strategy
- Member Development and Training Plan
- Workforce Plan (to be reviewed under customer connect programme)

Key Areas

- Customer services (operational)
- Car Parking (operations)
- Waste Management (operations and service optimisation)
- Street scene
- Member Services
- Member Training and Development
- Legal and Committee Services and HR Services
- Leisure, Public Realm, (Parks and Open Spaces (Including cemeteries, trees, woodland and playground improvement)
- Corporate Health and Safety

Customer services (operational)

The transformation programme, Customer Connect, is delivering better access to services for customers, 24 hours a day, seven days a week and is creating more opportunities to self-serve through improved digital options.

Phase 2 of the Customer Connect transition was delayed due to Covid-19 however the transition has now recommenced. The enhanced delivery of new capabilities within the authority will improve the service and experience delivered to customers and staff.

Over 600 core service processes were identified across the organisation and a significant number of minor processes. The work of the service redesign has been continuing to focus on the areas where there is the biggest opportunity to improve, by prioritising the core processes based on customer impact, volume and customer efficiency. The areas with the biggest opportunities were identified as the main focus for the redesign process. This task is ongoing with digital forms available online and the ability to set up customer accounts.

The organisation is utilizing the digital platform to build online forms that allow customer to self-serve online and provide the organisation with greater efficiencies in the back office. There are now 24 online forms covering a number of services, including Street Scene, Locality and Case Management. These forms allow the customer to access services online 24/7. The Digital Development Team has also developed 12 COVID application forms to support the various business grant schemes and test and trace application, as well as a number of internal forms which allow for work requests to flow through the organisation more efficiently. Since the enablement of the new forms and My Account in May 2020 there has been an increase in the number of online transactions. In 2020 (May to December) there were over 8,000 transactions and during January and February 2021 there has been 2,500 transactions recorded.

As of March 2021 a total of 2972 customers had created an Account.

- 1,563 were created in 2020.
- 1,409 have been created since the 1st January 2021

This heavy uptake has been reached without any significant external promotion of the account. Integration of the account with grant forms and the revenue and benefits system has seen sign up increase in recent months, as have the number of online transactions - residents interacting with us digitally without having an account.

The Council will be undertaking a Communications Plan alongside the annual billing process to promote customers to set up an account. The communications will also support a competition to win an iPad.

Website accessibility

The Council's website is highly rated by organisations that measure and benchmark the accessibility of our site. Particularly during Covid-19 the Council has been regularly updating its website to encourage Customers to access more information online.

During February 2021 the website had 131,252 page views and 35.8 thousand users. The most viewed web pages included:

- Bin collection calendar and bins and recycling content MySouthlakeland
- Planning – search for a planning application

- Business support grants
- MySouthlakeland, Pay and Apply
- Pay
- Council tax and housing benefit
- Apply

58% of customer are using mobile devices/ tablets to access the website, however searches via search engines continues to be the most popular route.

Moving forward the Council will be increasing the powered by google search to help direct customers to the appropriate platforms for their enquiries.

Car parking (operations)

Working collaboratively with the Economy, Culture and Leisure Portfolio the Council is seeking ways to increase car parking capacity within the areas of highest demand and respond to the challenges brought to us by Covid-19.

Following the reintroduction of charging in SLDC operated car parks, safety measures have been installed to slow the spread of the virus through social distancing, contactless card payments or pay by phone. The Council is encouraging a movement towards contactless, cash free payments across its car parks.

The Council is offering free car parking to those receiving a Covid vaccination at the Westmorland Shopping Centre. The Council is also providing free parking permits for all NHS staff working within the vaccination centre and has extended the opening hours of the car park.

Waste Management (operations and service optimisation) and Street scene

The Customer and Commercial Services and Climate Emergency and Localism portfolios have been working in partnership to support the waste management and street scene functions. Throughout the year there has been numerous social media messages to promote recycling and waste minimisation during recent months, supporting the Councils green initiative.

The street cleansing service trialled 2 electric vehicles, however in both cases the daily operational mileage exceeded the range of the vehicle. The service is continuing to monitor new vehicle technologies, particularly with regard to alternative fuels. Drivers are encouraged to turn off their engines when in stalled traffic.

Green Waste collections were partially reinstated from March 2021 with a monthly collection due to ongoing staffing pressures caused by Covid.

During the first Lockdown the Council made sure that all available vehicles were on the road each day and loaned vehicles from other authorities to continue with the scheduled grey waste and recycling collections. With the increased number of people working from home the Council has seen a very significant increase in recycling tonnages collected.

Member Services and Member Training and Development

The 2019/20 training plan had offered a variety of training opportunities available for members. Examples of this training available include:

- Social Media and Web skills
- Digital Skills Workshop
- Introduction to Your Ward
- Committee Inductions
- GDPR, FOI and Data Management
- Chairing Committee Skills
- Submitting Member Expenses Online
- Carbon Literacy Training

Feedback on the training provided had been extremely positive. Member Services are continuing to encourage members to receive committee papers electronically through the use of corporate IT kit. Corporate kit allows members to access council used systems such as Skype for Business, Mod Gov and SharePoint which support the Customer Connect Programme and GDPR regulations. We have seen an increase in usage of corporate kit during the pandemic.

Non-essential training for members was postponed due to Coronavirus, however several virtual briefing sessions have been undertaken focusing on Local Government Reorganisation, Understanding My Role and Responsibilities as a Corporate Parent, United Utilities Haweswater Aqueduct Resilience Programme, Covid-19 briefings and Local Government Reorganisation.

The Coronavirus pandemic has explored the Council's capabilities to use technology to conduct meetings and keep connected. All Councillors have been given access to new equipment and training on Microsoft Teams. This new virtual platform has allowed members to take part in virtual meetings internally and externally.

Legal and Committee Services and HR Services

Legal Services have been working effectively to reduce debts and take the appropriate action. Encroachment debts have been reduced by 25% since October 2019. Work continues to prioritise the completion of S106 agreements.

Workloads on contracts, grants and funding agreements have significantly increased together with property related work. Complex criminal, civil litigation and continued work of licensing is also being carried out.

The team has also provided ongoing support for the work required on Local Government Reform organising additional meetings and providing legal advice.

The team have established and implemented the Council's Virtual Meetings supporting effective decision making. The team have processed numerous emergency decisions both executive and non-executive.

Introducing new ways of working to ensure the Council has been in a position to respond quickly and effectively to Government policy, funding allocation and distribution. The team have advised at numerous committee and council meetings. Training Councillors and providing advice and guidance on the use of Microsoft Teams.

Work has commenced on revising the Councils constitution and the team are also considering the Local Government Associations recently issued Model Code of Conduct for members.

The HR team has continued to be heavily involved in supporting the organisation and its employees through an incredibly challenging period, Wellbeing has been a major focus with a wide range of activities delivered including;

- The figures for 2020 are showing a significant improvement on sickness absence figures in comparison to the previous year
- Launched a Mental Wellbeing at Work policy
- Extensive use of our Employee Assistance Programme including counselling support and the new Healthy app has now been launched
- Introduction of Family friendly policies including Smart working, Flexible working, Flexi-Time and Special Leave
- Extensive use of Occupational Health to support those in work as well as those on sickness leave
- Stress and COVID risk assessments
- Ongoing HR professional support
- Regular 'coffee mornings' with Team Leaders to provide, support, advice and directions to them and their teams and for them to share best practice
- The COVID site on sharepoint #together we can, desk based exercises, homeworking wellbeing etc.
- The new team talk sessions
- Conducted Staff wellbeing survey's
- Resilience workshops

Virtual training activities have resumed with the following being delivered:

- Customer service training – 'Connecting with our Customers' – delivered to more than 200 people this year via face-to-face and virtual means
- Personal resilience training piloted for 20 people, with more planned in near future
- Team Leader bite size training sessions with HR have commenced. Four out of five subjects delivered
- New starter meet and greet sessions with Chief Exec and Directors
- Staff drop-in sessions with Leadership Team
- Further leadership training planned with Leadership Team, supported by development work with Council Members
- Launch of an extensive catalogue of E-learning courses

Throughout the pandemic the Council has conducted the recruitment process via virtual interviews.

Leisure, Public Realm, (Parks and Open Spaces (Including cemeteries, trees, woodland and playground improvement)

The Parks and Open Spaces Strategy has identified the importance of good quality green spaces throughout the district. The strategy has been designed to provide clear direction for the management of council owned parks and open spaces over ten years. The strategy reviews the day to day maintenance and identifying improvements to parks and open spaces through working in partnership with communities, local businesses and partners. The strategy has incorporated a variety of different spaces including parks, sports fields, trees and woodlands and cemeteries.

Rayrigg Meadow Playground on the shores of Lake Windermere was accredited with a Bronze award for its commitment to inclusivity. The playground met the minimum requirements of good accessibility throughout the play space, provision for at least three senses to be accessed from a seating or standing position and an opportunity for all children to use their 'whole bodies' in dynamic play through sliding, climbing, spinning or swinging. As the playground enhances progresses it is hope that a silver award will be achieved.

Playgrounds have been opened at Millerground Bowness, Yew Tree Playing Fields, Grange Over Sands and Maryfell, Sedbergh. All the works undertaken at each park were completed by working in collaboration with community groups and have been designed to be inclusive and provide capital investment for 20 years.

Following a £125,000 investment and funding raised with the Friends of Abbot Hall Playground, the Abbot Hall playground in Kendal was revamped. A new play area was also opened at Castlefield and Greenbank in Ambleside where the Resident Association had helped to raise £85,000.

The Council worked with Grasmere Village Society to open the new playground at Broadgate Meadow in Grasmere. The playground is receiving great reviews and extra picnic benches are on order to finish this project.

The playground at Lightburn Park in Ulverston was also opened. The Friends of Lightburn Park worked alongside SLDC and the Town Council to raise £120,000 to replace the existing playground. The play area has a new footprint to allow park users to walk around the park without going through the play area. The new site offers a great variety of challenging equipment for all ages and abilities. Due to the close proximity of Sandside School, Locality staff consulted with the staff and head teacher for advice on the most appropriate equipment to make this playground inclusive.

The plans for the redevelopment at Queens Park in Windermere are continuing to progress and the project has now been split into two phases. The Community Group Windermere Park for All have been successful in securing a £25,000 grant from British Cycling to improve the pump track.

SLDC had been working with the residents at Hayclose Crescent in Kendal to add some play facilities to this awkward play space. Goals, astro turf kick-about area, extra play equipment, new fencing and a secure gate have now been installed.

Following the first lockdown the Council reopened all Council owned play areas in July 2020 in accordance with Government guidance. Playgrounds have remained open throughout further lockdowns however precautions were put in place to protect communities.

The project at Town View Fields has demonstrated a strong relationship with multiple agencies with the Natural Flood management scheme. Working with the support of the

Friends of Nobles Rest, The Environment Agency, The South Cumbria Rivers Trust and Cumbria County Council to create a scheme to slow the flow of floodwater during heavy rain. Funding has come from SLDC and the EA's DEFRA fund.

The project has opened up the Culvert to create a meandering stream running into a small wetland area before re-joining the culvert downstream. Two leaky timber dam structures will store and slowly release the water. As well as naturally slowing the flow of storm water, the newly created "bog garden" will hopefully attract a richer variety of wildlife to Town View Field, such as dragonflies, voles, frogs and toads. Now the culvert work is completed, the field's biodiversity will be further enriched by the planting of a wildflower meadow and a small damson orchard to help attract pollinators such as bees and butterflies.

The Parish tree planting letter sent out in 2019 identified locations to plant 55 trees on SLDC owned land, 8 trees on LDNPA owned land and 9 trees on private land adjacent to publically accessible areas. In total the Parish Tree Planting Letter has identified 173 tree planting locations. The scheme in Ford Park in Ulverston will create a new Arboretum and community orchard when 65 trees are planted.

Corporate Health and Safety

Throughout 2020/21 the Council has been using the Health and Safety Strategic Improvement Plan to ensure that the health, safety and wellbeing of staff is continuously improved. This plan is regularly reviewed at the Councils Internal Health, Safety and Wellbeing Board which meet on a quarterly basis. Each quarter a safety summary is presented to the committee to outline the accident data, what is affecting the Council, what the Council is doing well and methods to improve.

A review of the Councils Safety Management System has been completed. Usage showed that the reporting platform Safety Cloud was not well used due to the difficulty navigating the system. Following a review a new and improved, simplified system has been rolled out across the authority. The system has now been broken down into new areas containing appropriate sub sections in line with team requirements which would support monthly checklists. This review of the system has been well received and encouraged usage.

A review of generic policies and risk assessments had taken place to reduce the high level of duplication. Generic risk assessments relating to South Lakeland House are now available under a single sub section of the system. Areas of specialism assessments such as Town Fields Hostel and Street scene are now also available in specific service area policies.

At Town View Fields new working arrangements and rota have been introduced as well as violence and aggression training to better support staff.

During the Coronavirus Lockdowns the Council had installed protective and preventative measures to reopen its assets which protect both staff and communities. Measures included markings to adhere to social distancing, protective screens, sanitising facilities and staff continuing to work from home where possible. The offices at South Lakeland House remained open for employees unable to work from home, with the appropriate safety precautions installed.

The Health, Safety and Wellbeing of SLDC employees is key and all employees working within the community have been provided with the appropriate PPE and guidance to slow the spread of the virus i.e. Collection Crews, Locality Officers and Cash Collectors.