

PROCUREMENT OF LCC TELEPHONY SYSTEM

COMMENTS FROM THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD

At its meeting on 30 June 2022, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board considered the report and unanimously agreed to support the recommendations to the Executive.

In response to questions from members of the Board, the following points were confirmed:

- Members enquired about consequences from the long overdue “stabilisation upgrade” to the telephony system and queried why the upgrade was not carried out earlier as well as what could have been done to avoid implications by the delay. Officers explained that upgrade patches and version upgrades were deployed to ensure that software remained functional and up-to-date keeping systems functioning and technically compliant and this was the core purpose of that project. Numerous factors contributed to the delays including technical complexities in conjunction with the involvement of different organisations and key stakeholders, and more recently disruptions to the communications market during the pandemic. However, impacts to LCC had been well contained for many months now, including that the project had also provided an effective stabilisation of the existing software platform bringing service interruptions down limiting ongoing impact to LCC even whilst project completion was delayed in delivery. In addition, the target system had been available for some time with limited shortcomings to the requirements in the event LCC needed to perform an emergency migration away from the old system. Any commercial impact of the delay was mostly borne by the supplier and at each review continuing the technical project offered the best risk/cost profile for LCC. Officers highlighted the benefit of a stable and functioning system ahead of transitioning to the new system. When explaining why now was seen as the time to move to the next generation of telephony, Officers explained the pandemic saw disruption to the telephony market as organisations moved on mass towards alternative technologies to communicate, such as Zoom or Teams. This change saw new suppliers gain prominence in the market and a greater focus on products integrating with other solutions, such as Microsoft Office and Teams and away from putting telephones on desks. This combined with the Councils Digital Services aspirations means this was now the right time to move from the existing solution to a new solution that benefits from the recent advancements in functionality and provides the optimum base from which to re-procure the business operations element of the contact centre services.
- Members expressed a concern over the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) “bots” as part of automated interfaces with service users and emphasised in the need to maintain accessible and user-friendly services for all levels of technological ability, including elderly and vulnerable members of the public, ensuring that individuals would be able to reach services intended. Officers provided assurance that the new platform offered the opportunity to modernise interfaces with the public and that AI technology was used broadly to enable the use of natural language processing as means of processing and re-directing to the appropriate place (including leading to speaking with customer service representatives) as well as the use of chat functionality.

- Members enquired the ways in which the platform and new software solutions were being tested. Officers explained that testing was carried out by various groups of users from a diverse pool which included LCC staff members from across all directorates who were trained to look at solutions from a customer perspective, as well as established customer panels that allowed for customer opinions to be fed back from interactions with the systems under development.
- Officers added that a further work on how the interface will be designed was being proposed that aimed at understanding what market leading organisations were delivering and how to make the best use of the solutions available to support those who needed additional help, whilst enabling those who are able to transact by themselves. The intention was to start with lower complexity interactions and transactions and receive feedback whilst the system was being rolled out which would inform future developments.