

# Service Review: Customer Services

**To:**

The Executive Councillor for Finance & Resources: Councillor Mike Davey  
Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Committee – 5 October 2020

**Report by:**

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**Wards affected:**

All

## 1. Introduction / Executive Summary

1.1 Over the past two years the Council has invested significantly in digital technology to allow our customers to access services in new, more effective ways. The Covid-19 pandemic has also caused us to make changes to our customer services provision to respond to the national lockdown, by closing our face to face services and supporting our customers to move to other ways of accessing services.

1.2 To take account of these changes, a review of Customer Services has been carried out to identify the right service model for the future. This report sets out the findings and recommendations from the review.

1.3 The review proposes:

- carrying out work to improve the efficiency and resilience of Customer Services, and delivering a wider transformation plan to improve the customer experience and build a stronger customer service culture across the Council
- working with customers to encourage take-up of the digital self-service channels we are introducing, including enhanced 'assisted self-service' support for customers who need help accessing digital channels, and

- other digital inclusion activities for customers accessing Council services
- introducing an appointment-only face to face customer services model, alongside the continued provision of telephony – including closure of the cash offices at Mandela House and Arbury Road, and support for customers who pay in cash to move to different channels, supported by a triage model to make sure vulnerable customers are able to access the support they need.

## **2. Recommendations**

The Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources is recommended:

2.1 To approve the changes to Customer Services provision detailed in the body of the report, including, where necessary, introducing a revised staffing structure.

2.2 To delegate to the Head of Transformation the work to implement these changes, noting that the staff restructure is subject to consultation with staff and unions and engagement with tenant representatives on issues affecting the Council's tenants and leaseholders, and that the changes will be signed off by the Leader in accordance with the Council's Organisational Change policy.

## **3. Background**

3.1 The Customer Service Centre manages telephone, email and social media contacts into the Council and runs the face to face contact centre at Mandela House. The Council has also provided face to face contact arrangements at 171 Arbury Road, managed by Housing Services. At Mandela House, customers have historically received a blended face to face service. Customer Service Advisors have facilitated a drop-in service for Housing customers to see an advisor at any time, with appointments used for Council Tax and Benefits enquiries in the afternoons. Customers have been able to make payments at the cash

office or via the payment kiosk, use the self-service computer area or meet with staff from other services such as housing advice or licensing.

3.2 The Council has invested significantly in technology over the last two years to support delivery of its Digital Transformation Strategy. This has enabled an ambitious modernisation programme, currently in progress, to replace a number of legacy back-office IT systems and to integrate these with a single, self-service online access point, the My Cambridge customer portal, which sits alongside the existing website. This has been accompanied by reviews of our business processes to improve customers' experience of Council services, including the timeliness and efficiency of the ways their enquiries are handled.

3.3 The outcomes of this work will be that:

- customers will be able to access transactions, view the progress of their enquiries and the history of their interactions with the Council in a single place
- customers will be able to access these services when they want, and from wherever they want, without being restricted to office hours or being required to travel to a set location
- services will be supported by end to end integrated processes, reducing or removing the need to re-key data. This is a key benefit of the My Cambridge portal – while a number of services have e-forms hosted on our website and from the customer's perspective these are self-service, in most cases these are not yet integrated and must be manually processed by Customer Service Advisors to rekey data into other systems
- systems, information and data will be accessible from a range of locations, using mobile working technology, including while officers are out and about in the community
- the Council will benefit from better data and intelligence and from having more efficient processes, including a natural shift from more costly, manual channels to self-service by the customer.

Most major services will have online access by the end of 2020/21 or early in the next financial year, and more detail about this is given in the appendix to this report.

3.4 Our customers already engage with us through self-service digital channels. Over the last eighteen months we have introduced digital channels for services including waste and recycling, housing tenancy services, and streets maintenance. Self-service channels for Revenues & Benefits have been live for a number of years and were developed substantially in 2019/20, allowing customers to register for Council Tax, submit a Benefits claim, and notify the Council of a change of circumstances, all online. So far more than 8,000 people have signed up for a My Cambridge portal account.

3.5 We have also offered self-service payment capabilities via the internet for some time and have seen the proportion of transactions carried out in this way increase substantially over the last twelve months. In total, in 2019/20, 75% of payments were made through self-service channels, as were 34% of our overall transactions and requests for service (including payments).

### Number and % of transactions carried out, by contact channel, 2019/20

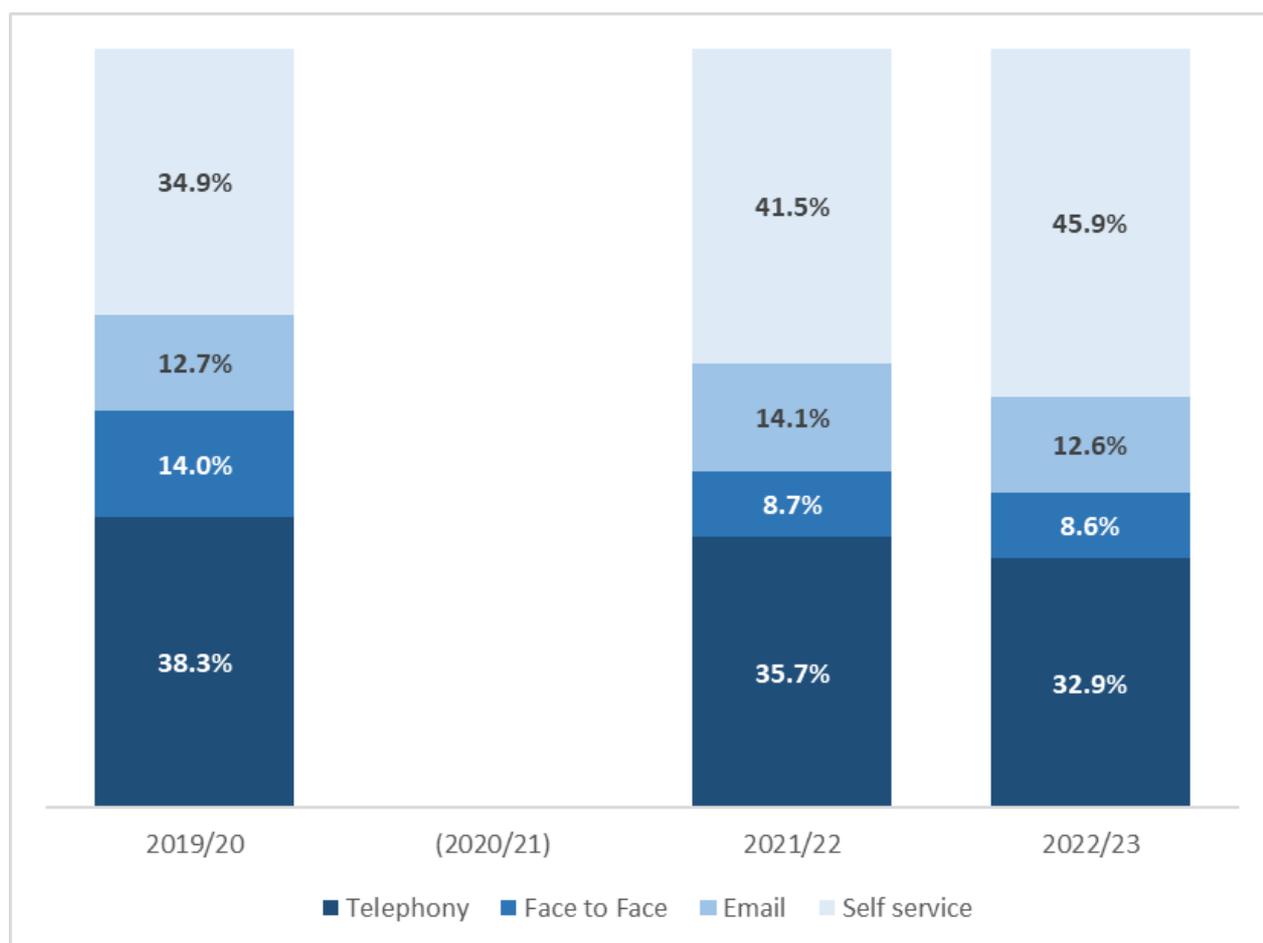
#### Number of customer contacts in FY 2020/21

Channel type	Telephony	Face to Face	Email	Self service
Number of customer contact/request	144,133	35839	51594	42184
%	53%	13%	19%	15%
Number of payment transactions/contact	11,385	20928	0	99531
%	9%	16%	0%	75%
Total number of contact	155,518	56767	51594	141715
% of total contact	38%	14%	13%	35%

\*this table does not include information-only hits to the Council's website

In future years, we predict that the proportion of transactions that are self-service would shift, without any further action by the Council, from just under 35% in 2019/20 to 41% in 2021/22 and 46% in 2022/23, as set out in the chart on the following page:

## Projected customer contact by channel, 2019/20 – 2022/23



\* We have not provided a projection for 2020/21 because of the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and lockdown. As in the table above, this chart does not include information-only hits to the Council's website.

3.6 It's not surprising that we are already seeing use of digital channels where these exist – the majority of our customers will already be using such channels to make purchases, payments, or manage their interactions with other organisations. Over the next six to twelve months a number of additional services will come online through the My Cambridge portal, including:

- additional Revenues & Benefits services (by October 2020)
- for Council tenants, the ability to report and track a housing repair (by December 2020)
- Environmental Health and Licensing (by June 2021)

As the range of Council transactions with a self-service option available increases, we would expect to see a natural increase in take-up of these channels. Putting more proactive measures in place to support the take-up of digital channels could increase this shift even further, meaning that there will be less effort needed to manage customer contact and as a result the service will be able to deliver the same, or better, outcomes, while using fewer resources.

3.7 Over the last six months, we have been forced to make changes to customer service provision as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. During this period, face to face services at Mandela House have been restricted to emergency appointments only and the cash office has been closed; as have the reception and cash office at 171 Arbury Road. This has given us the opportunity to test different ways of supporting customers to contact us, and to assess how a different face to face and payments model might work in practice.

3.8 Not so long ago, customer enquiries were handled by individual service areas, each of which answered their own telephones and even had their own reception areas. Ten years ago we set up the current Customer Service Centre, which brought all this activity into a single multi-skilled team. When the Customer Service Centre was set up, the main ways customers contacted us were through telephone and face to face routes (alongside a small number of emails) and the current service we offer is still mostly organised around these channels. However, since then the world has moved on and developments in digital and technology, in particular, present many opportunities to provide customer service in new and different ways.

3.9 Together, all these new opportunities, combined with the changes we have made in response to Covid-19, mean that it is the right time to think more widely about how we can best provide customer services in the future.

## 4. Service Review

4.1 The review has involved extensive engagement with the Customer Service Centre team to map the current service and identify improvement opportunities, as well as reviewing how other local authorities have transformed their customer services. The review has followed a number of principles:

- ensuring the Council's core customer service outcomes, set out in paragraph 4.2, will continue to be delivered
- improving the customer experience, including how we will identify issues that originate in services or processes outside the Customer Service Centre and how those issues can be resolved, in a timely way, on an ongoing basis
- making best use of digital self-service channels and supporting customers to take advantage of these
- ensuring vulnerable customers will be able to access the services they need, including face to face support where this is necessary and appropriate
- improving the efficiency and resilience of the service, by ensuring we have the right structure to meet future demand, and that opportunities are identified to deliver a more efficient service.

4.2 The Council's core customer service outcomes have been defined as follows:

- Customers (residents, businesses, and community groups) are able to access Council services with the appropriate level of support for their needs. For simple transactions this support may be minimal and rely on a self-service or automated channel. For more complex transactions or more vulnerable residents, more in-depth or tailored support may be needed
- Customer enquiries are dealt with in a timely way
- Customers know what has happened to their enquiry and when it will be responded to
- Customer satisfaction is enhanced, despite the service using less resource

- Customers' needs are reflected in the way services are designed (as we collect more data and information which can be used to improve services).

4.3 The review recommendations fall into three categories which are described in more detail in the remainder of this report:

- carrying out work to improve the efficiency and resilience of Customer Services, and delivering a wider transformation plan to improve the customer experience and build a stronger customer service culture across the Council
- working with customers to encourage take-up of the digital self-service channels we are introducing, including enhanced 'assisted self-service' support for customers who need help accessing digital channels, and other digital inclusion activities for customers accessing Council services
- introducing an appointment-only face to face customer services model, alongside the continued provision of telephony – including closure of the cash office and support for customers who pay in cash to move to different channels, supported by a triage model to make sure vulnerable customers are able to access the support they need.

#### 4.4 **Improving the efficiency and resilience of Customer Services and the customer experience across the Council.**

We will continue the work we are already carrying out to improve business processes, and, alongside this, deliver a customer experience improvement programme to identify and review current causes of 'avoidable contact'. Avoidable contact refers to enquiries which could have been avoided – for example, because customers are contacting us to follow up on the progress of a request or where something has not been delivered. Our digital strategy will help to address these issues, by routing enquiries more effectively to the correct service, providing more frequent, automated updates to customers on the progress of their enquiry, and giving managers access to data and information on how customer requests are being met, including performance against SLAs, which they can use to address performance challenges and complaint levels within their services.

4.5 We will also carry out work to encourage a more customer-centric culture across all parts of the Council. Work with services to draw in examples of best practice – and define what this means for Cambridge City Council – has already started, and will continue over the coming months. To implement this culture we will set and agree clear values, roles and accountabilities for customer service, and work with staff and managers to embed these through training and development across the organization.

4.6 Within Customer Services, we will also introduce other measures to improve provision for customers and increase resilience within the service, including webchat (which increases efficiency), and developing the team's ability to work across the full range of the Council's services.

4.7 All these measures will improve customer satisfaction and support reductions in the numbers of customer complaints, as well as streamlining processes and enabling the Council to deliver more efficiently as a result.

**4.8 Working with customers to encourage takeup of digital channels, and providing 'assisted self-service' support**

The Council's Digital Transformation Strategy (2018) sets out our intention that the majority of simple, transactional customer contact should in the future be delivered through self-service digital channels rather than by Customer Service Advisors, and that traditional contact channels will be used by vulnerable or high-urgency customers who genuinely need that level of support, including those who, even with assistance, are not able to use digital methods to contact us. By shifting most contact from traditional channels to digital routes which offer an easy, improved experience for most customers, we can improve customer satisfaction and the outcomes the service delivers, while reducing the effort we need to deliver customer services.

4.9 Over the remainder of 2020/21 and the early parts of 2021/22, we will therefore continue to introduce new self-service digital channels according to the plan described in paragraph 3.6 of this report. Customer Service Advisors will proactively encourage and support customers towards these channels to increase awareness and ensure they are easy to find, and we will look at where we can simplify customer access routes

– for example, our website currently offers around 150 email addresses – to make self-service digital channels the preferred route to access services. We will monitor the changes in customer demand and ensure these are taken into account in the proposals for the new staffing structure.

4.10 We will also deliver an enhanced ‘assisted self-service’ offer to ensure that customers who are able to access services digitally are supported to do so, while continuing to provide other channels such as telephony for those who are unable to use digital.

4.11 Before the Covid-19 lockdown, customers were able to access a self-service computer area in Mandela House which enabled us to provide ‘assisted self-service’ access to our digital channels. The Customer Services front-of-house team signposted customers to this self-service area, and supported customers to complete applications and make other requests for service, in and around their existing duties. Of the c.36,000 face-to-face transactions carried out in 2019/20, more than 7,300 were customers who were supported to access Council services online in this self-service area. Customers were also supported by community provision with Cambridge Online and the Citizens Advice Bureau both running 1-2 drop-in sessions per week in this area, which were attended by more than 2,300 customers over the year. Other digital inclusion activities were provided across the city during 2019/20 through the Council’s Digital Access Strategy.

4.12 We know that around 90% of residents do use the internet. However, residents have varying levels of digital skills and we need to ensure that we continue to provide the help and support needed to access services digitally, particularly for those who do not use the internet. Customers might need support because they lack access to the internet, lack trust in the service and/or don’t have the skills or confidence to use online services; some customers may also lack motivation or may not know how to overcome these barriers without support.

4.13 Our support will focus on providing access to equipment and internet connectivity, including the continued rollout of free Wi-Fi, and on increasing customers’ confidence, skills and appetite to be able to access

Council services online, now and in the future. We will design this around three levels of need, following best practice recommendations:

1. **Customers who with access and a small amount of help and encouragement could access services online, now and in the future** – This will include access to equipment, first time assistance, signposting to courses, light touch signposting and navigation of services, information and guidance
2. **Customers who with access and more intensive support will be able to access services online, now and potentially in the future** – This could include assistance with using a PC, setting up an email address or a My Cambridge account; side by side assistance with completion of forms; explaining service provision and navigation of services, referral to ICT and other courses and/or referral to other services and partners for help and assistance
3. **Customers who temporarily or who will always require officer support and/or advocacy to navigate and/or access services** – This support will include appointments, face to face or by telephone, to facilitate access to services for the customer including advocacy and referral across multiple departments. These customers would not be expected to self serve.

4.14 Customers will be provided 'digital assistance' via **all** access channels to enable them to effectively and confidently use the digital platform if they are able to do so. The support, by channel, will include:

- Digital – webchat, 'how to' guides and FAQs, including signpost/access to other channels to ensure customers who are struggling can get the services they need
- Telephone – first time assistance, advice and information, form navigation or setting up an account on behalf of the customer
- Face-to-face – access to equipment and facilities; side by side assistance to set up a My Cambridge account and/or email address, as carried out by the front-of-house team at Mandela House before lockdown.

4.15 In addition, customers at Mandela House will be able to access an enhanced meet and greet service and floor walkers to direct them to

the appropriate assistance route, including assisted self-service. We will also look at opportunities where officers carrying out home or community visits could provide similar assistance, advice or support to residents.

4.16 We will reopen the Mandela House self-service area and will also look to develop other access arrangements via our own sites and those provided through our partners, to join up provision of access to PCs, devices and Wi-Fi.

4.17 As we increasingly digitise services we need to ensure that no-one is left behind. To do this, we will pro-actively 'reach out' to residents in order to understand their access requirements and to deliver activities that will help them to 'get online', through digital inclusion activities commissioned through our digital partnership arrangements.

#### **4.18 Reconfiguring the Council's face to face customer services, including the reception and cash offices at Mandela House and Arbury Road**

To ensure staff and customers were kept safe during the Covid-19 lockdown, we took the decision to close the reception areas at Mandela House and Arbury Road, including the drop-in face-to-face services, the cash office and payment kiosks, and the self-service area at Mandela House. During this time the Customer Service Centre has continued to offer telephony, email and self-service access and has offered an appointment-only face to face service staffed by two Customer Service Advisors on two days per week. This has ensured emergency or otherwise vulnerable customers are still able to access Council services during the lockdown period. Take-up of these appointments has been low, though this will in part reflect the lockdown restrictions on customers' movement and the reduced number of Council services running during this time – we have seen an overall fall in contacts across all channels during the lockdown period. This model has been working well during the Covid-19 lockdown period and has enabled the Customer Service Centre to manage emergencies while releasing capacity to support other work including the community resilience response.

4.19 Over the last year we had already seen a fall in the proportion of transactions made through the cash office and a rise in the number of payments made through self-service channels, including touch-tone and online payments. During lockdown we have seen this shift sustained with an increase of nearly 20% – c.7,000 transactions or £1.83m – in payments made through self-service channels between March and August 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. We know that many of our customers are already using alternative payment routes and those who still need to make rent and Council Tax payments by cash can do this through other channels including PayPoint, which has locations all over the country including approximately 25 outlets within the city of Cambridge.

4.20 Many other local authorities provide appointment-only face to face services, including Norwich City Council, which provides comparable services to CCC, in a similar city. This has allowed them to meet demand more efficiently and effectively while developing their digital self-service offering. Many local authorities have also reduced or eliminated cash transactions entirely, including Birmingham and Leeds City Councils, and the London Borough of Brent – the latter has been cashless since 2016, including for highly vulnerable adult social care customers.

4.21 The review proposes that we will formally adopt an appointment-only face to face service and move to a cashless payments model, including closure of the Arbury Road cash office, based on the experience of working in this way over the past six months. To deliver this, we would introduce an enhanced triage service across all customer contact channels providing additional support to ensure customers are able to access the right services to meet their needs. Where appropriate this would include signposting to assisted self-service and/or information, advice and guidance, but customers identified as being more vulnerable or with complex needs will be able to access a face-to-face service if needed – including advocacy to navigate Council and partner services – or will be supported through a specialist pathway designed for emergencies – such as homelessness presentation. We will design and agree a vulnerability framework to support Customer Service Advisors to triage customers and ensure those in need of support are identified.

4.22 Cash accounts for 16% of total payments with 94% of these related to payment of rents, service charge or Council Tax. We know that customers who choose to make a cash payment fall into the following groups:

- Those who prefer to pay by cash
- Those that don't have access or the skills to do so online
- Those that can't, usually as they require advice – i.e. don't know which services they are paying for or the amount due, or don't have adequate information to make the payment (such as an invoice number)
- Customers of a small number of specific services (for example, paying for a taxi license having had an appointment, making a planning application, applying for a temporary events notice)
- A small number of customers with a long-standing relationship with cashiers in relation to rent payments, who may need support and assistance to use other methods.

4.23 These issues can be mitigated through effective triage in Customer Services, combined with proactive support to those individuals known to cashiers and enhanced information/engagement about different ways that customers can get advice and make payments, including cash. Cash payments can continue to be made via banks and PayPoint for Council Tax and Rent; customers can also make payments at Post Offices using a payment card. We will provide specific support to customers who do not have a bank account to ensure they are still able to make payments.

4.24 It is not known what the lasting effect of Covid-19 on customer behaviour will be. To understand this, and to inform and confirm the model and resource requirement for the face to face service, it is proposed that the revised service offer is tested via a trial in autumn 2020. The trial will enable us to capture data and customer feedback in relation to assisted self-service, appointments take-up, triage of those who are vulnerable and have complex needs, and general footfall at Mandela House, which will in turn inform the final proposals for the future service structure.

## **5. Implications**

### **a) Financial Implications**

The restructure, and the associated closure of the Arbury Road cash office, is expected to deliver an ongoing annual saving in the region of £300 - £350,000 per annum from the start of the financial year 2021/22, with a payback period for any costs of change not covered by existing budgets, depending on the final structure adopted. This saving will be attributed across the General Fund and HRA with the precise allocation to be determined following further work.

Some investment will be required in 2020/21 to support implementation, for example, increased staffing levels to support individuals to transfer to digital channels; reconfiguration of the self-service area at Mandela House to ensure the space is fit for purpose and Covid safe. The majority of this investment will be covered through existing service budgets.

### **b) Staffing Implications**

Staff consultation will begin in Autumn 2020, and will include the full engagement of staff working in the service and in related areas, to ensure the new service design will meet the Council's needs and that issues affecting staff have been considered in accordance with the Council's Organisational Change Policy.

We expect that managing customer demand in the future will require around 75% of the work it takes to manage it now. Customer Services is currently made up of 36.7 FTE – one Operations Manager, two Team Managers, three Principal Customer Service Advisors, nine Senior Customer Service Advisors, 21 Customer Service Advisors and a Concierge, and the Arbury Road cashiering service is made up of 1.2 FTE. The final staffing structure will be determined after the consultation. The service is currently holding a number of vacancies which would offset any changes in staff numbers.

### **c) Equality and Poverty Implications**

An initial Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out and the needs it has identified have been taken into account in the design of the new service. These needs are being mitigated through:

- introduction of the vulnerability framework and triage function, which will ensure continued provision of a face to face service where needed for customers with additional needs
- additional support to help customers transition to self-service channels and alternative payment methods
- ongoing provision of 'assisted self-service' and digital inclusion activities.

A further Equality Impact Assessment will be carried out once final proposals have been developed for the new service and new structure.

#### **d) Environmental Implications**

No immediate environmental implications. Fewer customers travelling to Mandela House to access face to face services could reduce the Council's future carbon footprint from travel-related energy use and emissions; as would ongoing home working, continuing from the arrangements under the Covid-19 lockdown and supported by the transition to appointment-only face to face.

#### **e) Procurement Implications: None**

#### **f) Community Safety Implications**

Mandela House has historically been a hate crime reporting centre and it is proposed that this will continue under the new service model.

#### **g) Consultation and communication considerations**

Staff and union consultation will commence Autumn 2020, with a detailed consultation paper/draft structure, engagement opportunities for all staff, and careful consideration of responses prior to an implementation report.

A full communications and engagement plan is being developed to ensure customers are adequately informed about changes affecting them, and customer feedback will be taken into account throughout the implementation of these proposals.

As this decision has a specific impact on customer service provision at Arbury Road, tenant representatives have been engaged in the lead up to

publication of this report and the Executive Member for Housing, along with members of the Housing Scrutiny Committee, has also been briefed.

## **6. Background papers**

Digital Transformation Strategy, Strategy and Resources Committee, 2 July 2018

<https://democracy.cambridge.gov.uk/ielssueDetails.aspx?IId=20852&PlanId=0&Opt=3#AI20535>

## **7. Inspection of papers**

To inspect the background papers or if you have a query on the report please contact:

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