

‘Responding to Our Customers’ – Executive Commentary

I would like to thank the Co-Ordinating Overview & Scrutiny Committee, and all those who contributed to this inquiry, for this thorough review of customer service practice in our key service areas. This report is a valuable contribution to our work to improve the Council’s response to citizens, and its recommendations will play an important role in our improvement journey over the next two years.

I agree with the Committee that customer services, and focusing on the things that really matter to our citizens and communities, should be at the core of everything we do as a Council. All too often, however, this has not been the case. As noted within this report, on too many occasions we have focused on the resolution of individual complaints rather than investigating the root causes of issues within services, missing opportunities to improve service delivery and frustrating customers. I believe that customer services, at its best, is not just about passively processing complaints and queries, but about proactively and relentlessly seeking out opportunities to identify problems and improve services. No organisation wants to receive complaints – but when we do, we should treat each one as a valuable opportunity to identify where we are going wrong, and commit to putting things right as quickly as possible.

Over the last year, we have made substantial progress in improving our approach to complaints and queries, and I am pleased to see this acknowledged by the Committee in their inquiry. The consolidation of telephone lines within the Contact Centre, ongoing developments to our website, and the introduction of Resolution Champions within service areas have all helped to improve the customer journey within the Council. However, we know that we need to go much further to become a truly ‘customer-focused’ organisation. This report identifies three main themes for improvement – creating a common Council-wide approach to customer services, focusing on identifying the root causes of issues, and using customer feedback to guide investment – and I am pleased to say that progress is already being made across all of these areas. This includes the investment of over £1.3 million to establish virtual dedicated complaints teams within each directorate, enabling one ‘council-wide’ standardised approach to complaints and queries while maintaining vital local links to services. Alongside this, we are moving forward with a refresh of our Citizens Access Strategy, to be completed by September 2021, and the agreement of a new corporate performance framework that focuses on measuring the things that truly matter to citizens.

When this inquiry first started, no one could have predicated that the Council would soon be facing its biggest challenge in a century – the COVID-19 pandemic. I am grateful to the Committee for extending its evidence gathering processes to include our emergency response to the crisis, and gratified to see the tremendous efforts of our customer services team acknowledged within this report. We know that these are uncertain and worrying times for citizens, with many people accessing our services for the first time, and I am extremely proud of the work carried out by our staff to make sure that help was there for

those who needed it most. Our response to the pandemic demonstrates just what we are capable of when we put citizens first.

I look forward to working together with Members, officers, and the Committee to deliver the recommendations in this report, and ensure that all our customers receive the service that they deserve.

Councillor Brigid Jones

Deputy Leader, Birmingham City Council