

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

FINANCE, REGENERATION AND PROPERTY SCRUTINY SELECT COMMITTEE

17 September 2024

**Joint Report of the Director of Central Services and
Director of Finance and Transformation**

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Non-Key Decision (Decision may be taken by the Cabinet Member)

1 CUSTOMER CONTACT CENTRE - ENHANCED FACILITIES

This report advises Members of the Committee of additional functionality through the Customer Contact system to enable automated webchat as an enhancement to our current facility. It is recommended that the licences to enable automated webchat are purchased and funded from the Transformation Reserve.

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 Members may be aware of the Digital and IT Strategy approved in Autumn last year. The mission of the digital strategy is to deliver the priorities of Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council (TMBC) through **challenge, innovation and transformation**, underpinned by technology.

1.1.2 In adopting the new Digital & IT strategy, Cabinet recognised some **principles** which can have positive impacts on the Council's resources:

- 1) Increased efficiency through automated processes, streamlining workflows, and reducing the need for manual administration.
- 2) Improved customer experience through providing customers with more convenient and personalised services. This can lead to increased customer confidence and satisfaction, which can in turn lead to increased digital engagement. Thus, sustain the resource growth demand.

1.1.3 The Strategy is underpinned by individual projects. Each project is assessed on its own merits from both a financial perspective and its contribution to the overall aims and objectives.

1.1.4 This report sets out the details of one project in relation to “webchat” which contributes to the principles set out in paragraph 1.1.2 above.

1.2 Webchat

- 1.2.1 To date, webchats have been performed by Customer Services staff “manually”, interspersed with dealing with telephone calls. Naturally, this means that the webchat function is only offered to customers during working hours although the availability of this functionality can be impacted during periods of high demand when staff resources are allocated fully to answering telephone calls. Expectations of customers have increased, and there is now an expectation of service beyond office hours to fit with customer lifestyles.
- 1.2.2 Our Anywhere 365 (AW365) system used by our Customer Contact Centre includes the facility to enable the Council to use automated processes to undertake the webchat service. This would not only meet the increasing expectations of customers for services ‘out of hours’ (24/7) but also free up staff time for more complex calls from potentially more vulnerable and older residents. This will also offer support to website users by providing assistance with the completion of webforms which is not currently offered within the current customer service arrangements.
- 1.2.3 During normal office hours, it is important that customers always have the option to communicate directly with a member of Council staff. Therefore, Customers who are making use of on-line automation services, will be able to opt out if it is not meeting their needs.
- 1.2.4 This is an important consideration in the context of the Council’s desire to keep pace with rising customer expectations, deliver effective and responsive services, and continue to deliver greater efficiencies.
- 1.2.5 To enact the automated webchat facility will require the purchase of additional licences. There is a one-off cost of £9,408 which will enable the licences for the remainder of the AW365 contract (approximately two years), and it is proposed that this is funded from the transformation reserve.
- 1.2.6 There is the potential for efficiency savings later following the initial settling in period and the further consolidation of other service areas into the centralised customer contact centre under our “One Council” ethos set out within our council-wide Digital Strategy.
- 1.2.7 A detailed business case for the purchase of the additional licences is set out in the evaluation at **[Annex 1]**.
- 1.2.8 Anywhere365 is a product that is used globally by 2000+ organisations within both public and private sectors including NHS. It has a proven track record of delivering exceptional customer experiences while leveraging organisation’s existing investments in the Microsoft product suites such as MS Teams and Azure cloud services.

- 1.2.9 Our initial tests and demonstrations have provided us the assurance, that their WebChat solution will help us hit the ground running from day one and improve success rate incrementally.
- 1.2.10 Amongst multiple local authorities adopting Anywhere365 as their contact management system within the UK, the case study below highlights how Leicestershire County council has recently transformed their customer services.

[Leicestershire County Council Reduced Calls by 30-70% Across Various Contact Centers \(anywhere365.io\)](#)

1.3 Legal Implications

- 1.3.1 Procurement is undertaken in accordance with the Council's financial rules and the purchasing guide.

1.4 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.4.1 As set out above, there is a one off cost of £9,408 which will enable the licences for the remainder of the AW365 contract. This can be funded from the transformation reserve.
- 1.4.2 There is the potential for efficiency savings later following the initial settling in period and the further consolidation of other service areas into the centralised contact centre under our "One Council" ethos.

1.5 Risk Assessment

- 1.5.1 Digital solutions can help to manage demand pressures and make limited resources/capacity go further. However, reliance on digital services can also bring risks. If services are down for prolonged periods, productivity of staff is compromised as are services to the public. The Council has a range of business continuity arrangements in place to help manage this type of risk as well as robust arrangements for the management of the Council's ICT infrastructure to keep these risks to an absolute minimum.
- 1.5.2 IT resources relating to building out the Webchat flow and integration with backend systems will need to be programmed. The Council will also be reliant upon third party support for helping with integration to back-end systems

1.6 Equality Impact Assessment

- 1.6.1 The proposals in this paper should increase the accessibility of Council services, by enabling more people to access on-line information and services, both in normal office hours, and at other times that are convenient for them. The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

1.7 Policy Considerations

1.7.1 Customer Contact

1.7.2 Communications

1.7.3 Business Continuity/Resilience

1.8 Recommendations

1.8.1 It is **RECOMMENDED** to Cabinet that:

- 1) The automated webchat functionality enabled through the Customer Contact system; and
- 2) The cost of £9,408 for additional AW365 licences (until the end of the AW365 contract) is funded from the Transformation Reserve.

The Director of Central Services and Director of Finance and Transformation confirm that the proposals contained in the recommendation(s), if approved, will fall within the Council's Budget and Policy Framework.

Background papers:

Nil

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