Access to Services Review

Final Decision-Maker	Communities, Housing and Environment Committee
Lead Head of Service	Angela Woodhouse, Head of Policy, Communications and Governance
Lead Officer and Report Author	Orla Sweeney Equalities and Corporate Policy Officer
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

Executive Summary

At the end of the 2018-19 Municipal Year, the Communities Housing and Environment Committee approved a recommendation that a report be brought forward to scope a review of accessibility to services for residents. This was subject to the Committee's existing work programme.

It was identified that accessibility issues impacted on a broad range of residents, such as elderly residents and those who did not have ready access to online information and that mental and physical disabilities were to be a consideration when undertaking the work.

Purpose of Report

To decide how to progress the recommendation regarding a review of accessibility to services for residents.

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

1. To agree the scope at appendix 1 and discussed at paragraph 1.3 (onwards).
2. That the Head of Policy, Communications and Governance, in consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairman, be given delegated authority to form a task and finish group and timetable a review, reporting back to the committee at its next available meeting.

Timetable	
Meeting	*Date*
CHE Committee	11 February 2020

Access to Service Review

CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	The four Strategic Plan objectives are: • Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure • Safe, Clean and Green • Homes and Communities • A Thriving Place Accepting the recommendations will materially improve the Council's ability to achieve its Homes and Communities priority.	Anna Collier, Policy and Information Manager
Cross Cutting Objectives	The four cross-cutting objectives are: • Heritage is Respected • Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced • Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved • Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected The report recommendation(s) supports the achievement of the following cross cutting objectives: • Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced • Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved	Anna Collier, Policy and Information Manager
Risk Management	Please refer to section 4 of the report for risk evaluation.	Anna Collier, Policy and Information Manager
Financial	The recommended option could be delivered within existing resources as set out in paragraph 2.2 of the report and outlined in section 3. Should the Committee wish to take an alternative course of action, budgetary implications would have to be considered and agreement sought.	[Section 151 Officer & Finance Team]

Staffing	The preferred option could be delivered within existing staffing arrangements.	Anna Collier, Policy and Information Manager
Legal	The Council's has in place processes to fulfil its public sector duty under the Equalities Act.	Legal Team
Privacy and Data Protection	Privacy and data protection would be a consideration of a review and a data privacy impact assessment completed as appropriate.	Anna Collier, Policy and Information Manager
Equalities	We recognise the recommendations may have varying impacts on different communities within Maidstone. An equalities impact assessment would be undertaken as part of an agreed project or review going forward.	Anna Collier, Policy and Information Manager
Public Health	We recognise that the recommendations could have a positive impact on population health or that of individuals.	Public Health Officer
Crime and Disorder	No impact identified.	Anna Collier, Policy and Information Manager
Procurement	No impact identified	Anna Collier, Policy and Information Manager

1.   INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1   A member agenda item request to review access to the Council's services was considered by the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee in. A summary of the discussion minuted is outlined below, along with the recommendation made:

- A review of the "Access to the Council's Service for Disabled People 2005-2006", and the recommendations in the report, was helpful to understand the work undertaken to promote accessibility to Maidstone Borough Council services.
- Accessibility issues impacted on a broad range of residents, such as elderly residents and those who did not have ready access to online information.
- Should a Working Group be established, this was to comprise of representative groups in the Borough.

- Mental and physical disabilities were to be a consideration when undertaking the work.
- The promotion of equalities training for staff was beneficial.
- In response to questions from the Committee, Mrs Angela Woodhouse, Head of Policy, Communications and Governance, stated that there was the potential to incorporate the work in the Equalities Action Plan, which was considered by the Policy and Resources Committee. Furthermore, Councillor input would be advantageous in the scoping and delivery of the work.

RESOLVED: That a report be brought to the next appropriate Communities, Housing and Environment Committee meeting setting out the scope of a review of accessibility to services for residents.

1.2 This report has been brought forward, as permissible by the Committee's work programme for 2019/20 and in the interim a watching brief has been kept on its behalf.

Developing the Scope

1.3 To develop the scope a review was undertaken of what arrangements the Council has in place to ensure an equitable level of access to services.

1.4 Equality remains a high priority for the Council. There are legislative responsibilities which must be adhered to, the following is a list of some of the legislation and guidance that guides it.

- Equalities Act 2010
- The Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018
- Accessibility communication formats (guidance)
- DDA compliance

1.5 It has strong internal processes in place to support this. All reports for decision are reviewed, to ensure that policies that impact on the delivery of our services include a detailed consideration of equalities impacts. Recently health has been included as part of this review function to ensure the Council is supporting the delivery of its strategic cross-cutting objective 'Health inequalities are addressed and reduced'.

1.6 Legislation also informs the Council's policies, strategies and action plans and will be reflected in the following documents:

- Communications Strategy
- Customer Care Standards
- Digital Inclusion Strategy
- Equalities Policy and Action Plan
- Statement for community Involvement (Planning)

1.7 The Equalities Action Plan assists in monitoring the way in which the Council is delivering on its legislative responsibilities and includes workstreams that contribute to ensuring it is reaching residents and that they are accessing its services. This is achieved in some of the following ways:

- Extensive consultation and engagement with residents
- Ensuring that the website is compliant with accessibility regulation for public sector bodies
- Robust processes for equalities impact assessments as part of decision making
- Data intelligence and insight

1.8 In terms of ensuring that the Council is meeting and delivering on its legislative responsibility, the review identifies that the Council is meeting the desired requirements.

1.9 However, there is a clear consensus, as identified in the motion put forward, that there is more that could be done to understand resident's needs and further enable their access to services.

1.10 The scoping document for a review of access to services can be found at appendix 1 to this report. The scope's focus is on the customer experience when accessing services.

1.11 There are a number of ways residents access council services: in person, online, by telephone, by email and via their elected members.

1.12 Each access method presents a different range of barriers and challenges. Consideration needs to be given as to how residents can be enabled through supporting technological processes, financial and social inclusion, Officer and Member training and the physical environment i.e. Council buildings.

1.13 The Link remains the Council's public-facing access point for residents and visitors to the Council's core services, in addition, it has visitor venues ranging from historical buildings like Maidstone Museum to its many Parks and Open Spaces. From this perspective, it should be considered whether the support, particularly for front line staff, to meet the accessibility needs of residents is in place.

1.14 In addition to the above scope, in terms of ensuring that the findings of any chosen review pathway achieve the desired outcome and are embedded across the Council, Members could look to producing an Accessibility Strategy.

1.15 There are a number of policies supporting accessibility across the Council. A Strategy would set a requirement for standards to be implemented across council business and provide clarity on what the Council does and what it does to support and enable residents; how it meets legislative requirements whilst ensuring a Maidstone specific standard.

1.16 This approach would also provide the opportunity for a periodical review process and ensure that elected members had ongoing oversight of the Council's approach to accessibility

<u>Review approach</u>

1.17 There are a number of officers across Council that have excellent knowledge in the delivery and development of services and Members may want to call on them to support this review. This includes Customer Services, Transformation and Digital Services, Property Services and Communications. This would also provide the opportunity to bring together expertise from across the Council along with external sources.

1.18 It is proposed that the review would take place over a 6-month period.

2   AVAILABLE OPTIONS

2.1   The Communities, Housing and Environment Committee has a number of options open to it to take forward the review, all of which would incur resource implications unless no further action was agreed.

2.2   As set out in the constitution all Committees may hold inquiries and investigate the available options for future direction in policy development.

2.3   The Committee has the power to set up working groups to conduct scrutiny type reviews. The actions above could be considered by a working group and findings reported to the Committee.

2.4   The Committee could undertake an inquiry and review as part of its usual meetings and business with activities planned throughout an agreed timescale to complete the review.

2.5   The Committee could ask officers to lead and oversee the review and report back to committee within agreed timescales.

2.6   The Committee could agree to take no further action.

3.   PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1   The option recommended to Committee is set out at paragraph 2.2.

3.2   It is clear that understanding and addressing the challenges to accessibility faced by residents would support the delivery of the Strategic priority 'Homes and Communities' and the cross-cutting objectives, 'Health Inequalities are addressed' and reduced and 'Deprivation and Social mobility is improved.'

4.   RISK

4.1   In agreeing the preferred recommendation set out in section 3 of this report the Committee would not only be enhancing and raising the profile of the

way in which the Council fulfils its legislative duties in terms of ensuring accessibility to services for residents but working to create a new standard reflective of Maidstone Borough Council's commitment to this agenda.

4.2 If the Committee chose to do nothing the Council would continue to fulfil its legislative responsibilities in this area as a Public Authority.

4.3 If the Committee chose another option, there could be cost implications and a lack of support that could prevent the review fulfilling a desired outcome.

5. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

5.1 None

6. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

6.1 That the Head of Policy, Communications and Governance, in consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairman agree membership of a task and finish group and a meeting be arranged to agree a timetable.

7. REPORT APPENDICES

- Appendix 1: Scoping Review – Access to Services

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Member agenda item request