

**Customer & Corporate Services Scrutiny  
Management Committee**

**3 October 2022**

Report of the Director of Customer & Communities

**Customer Centre Performance**

**Summary**

1. This paper provides Customer & Corporate Services Scrutiny Management Committee with detailed information on the current telephone performance pressures in the Customer Centre within the council's Customer Services Team.

**Recommendation**

2. Members of the Committee are asked to note the report and consider any further work to report back to the committee as part of its work programme.

Reason: To secure scrutiny of council service performance where it impacts on customer experience

**Background**

3. The strategic direction of Customer Services prior to the covid-19 pandemic was to provide residents with 24/7 transactional access to the council's key services channel shifting phone traffic to internet transactions where possible in order to create efficient processes, but also to focus remaining resources on those residents who could not access services in any other way. With this in mind 7.5 full time equivalent posts were held vacant with one redundancy (Customer Services Team Manager) as part of corporate savings targets during 2019 at a time when service level was at nearly 80% (calls answered within 20 seconds) and total calls answered 99%. The saving was eventually used to replace a growth bid to create the web services team and it transpired this was a critical decision given the web services team's key role during the pandemic. This left the Customer Centre very lean as it moved into 2020/21 and the two years at the height the covid-19 pandemic.

4. In terms of further context, initiatives related to the pandemic followed by further government support in respect of the cost of living crisis has generated a high volume of ongoing phone contact from residents. To add to this, council driven changes including the introduction of the new digital parking system has further increased the volume and complexity of calls. High staff turnover following the end of lockdown and difficulties in recruiting to vacancies has exacerbated the situation.
5. Despite these ongoing challenges staff within the Customer Centre have continued to work hard in providing a high quality and professional service to all our residents. The following paragraphs provide more detailed information.

### **The Service & Workforce**

6. The Customer Centre is the main point of contact for all residents by phone, face to face and web chat for the services below. The Web Services Team provide the council's website, corporate web governance and a number of successful galaxy sites also sit within Customer Services. The phone paths cover the following services:
  - Switchboard
  - Council Tax
  - Housing Benefit
  - Waste
  - Highways
  - Environment
  - Registrars
  - Electoral
  - Concessionary Travel
  - Parking
  - Planning.
7. The Centre was badly affected at the end of the final pandemic lockdown when a large number of staff left the organisation as has been experienced by other council services and employers across all sectors, due to opportunities and pay offers elsewhere. Recruitment has been ongoing since summer 2021 and there are still 7 vacancies with 3 vacancies recruited to but not yet occupied (August 2022) which is 25% of the workforce. There is also a rolling recruitment programme that has been in place since the end of 2021.

8. This only tells part of the story, at the end of the pandemic as staff started to leave, there was an experienced workforce of approximately 40 staff. As of August, this year there were only 10 long term experienced staff remaining in the cohort which has greatly impacted on the ability to cover all the phone paths effectively with a depth of knowledge previously provided. The current lack of experienced staff along with vacancies still being carried means they require more support and the complex calls are being dealt with by a smaller group of officers.
9. In addition to the immediate impact on the phone paths the Customer Centre has always been seen as an introductory incubator providing a way into a council career for applicants. It provides good grounding as new staff learn about the organisation, what it does and the key departments as well as working with elected members. This flow of staff also helps the organisation keep a lower age profile as for many working in customer services was their first job after leaving education. The current lack of experienced staff along with vacancies still being carried may well have an impact on other services in the future.
10. Due to the nature of the role it has been accepted over the years that there will always be some turnover however more recently staff have moved out of the organisation into retail or leisure where the pay is comparative or higher. As recruitment is ongoing even when all posts are filled it will take time for staff to be fully trained across all the phone paths and longer still to replace the lost experience.
11. The increased number of abusive and difficult calls has also not helped with staff retention. Due to the wait times calls can now be longer as staff need to apologise and at times diffuse frustrated customers before then addressing the purpose of the calls. The number of abusive calls is not recorded but staff report the issue to their managers, and the service has captured some anecdotal comments shown below. These are from 2021 but more work from a Health & Safety perspective is now being undertaken to understand the size and shape of the issue and to look at risk mitigations to protect staff as far as possible:
  - The number of unpleasant customers has increased.
  - Not brilliant at the moment it is difficult taking abuse from customers.
  - Found this past week very hard and energy draining as have had a few challenging customers.

12. The complexity of calls has also increased arising from providing an offline solution to digital processes which requires additional form filling. Examples of this include the Energy Rebate, the new parking system but there are many others.
13. Whilst the points above reflect the current position the service remains optimistic as it continues with recruitment and training. The training hour each Thursday morning introduced in late 2021 is helping with the training of new recruits, team building and continues to be greatly appreciated by the staff.
14. The effect of retention payments for existing and new staff introduced from April this year seem to have had little impact in retaining staff however without it the service may have lost even more and would be in a worse position. This was a one-off initiative and cannot be repeated due to affordability.

### **Performance**

15. In terms of the overall performance some context is required around the current figures. For example, during the month of July 2022 a number of high demand issues affected performance in addition to the vacancies including:
  - The issuing of 16,000 letters to customers who had not claimed the government's energy rebate (£150 per household in Band A-D council tax bands).
  - Writing to over 3,000 pensioners who became eligible for the Household Support Fund for the first time.
  - Issuing of 5,000 summonses for the largest council tax court of the year.
  - Managing calls following an error on a large statutory canvass.
16. The effect of the issues in July set out at paragraph 15 above are clearly shown in the telephone service level graph set out at the Annex to this report.
17. The impact on customer wait times overall on two specific phone paths is shown in more detail compared to the pre-covid position in Table 1 below:

Table 1

| Description             | 2019/20<br>(financial year) | 12 <sup>th</sup> July 21 | 11 <sup>th</sup> July 22 |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>All Calls</b>        |                             |                          |                          |
| Service Level           | 77%                         | 10%                      | 4.4%                     |
| Total Calls Answered    | 97%                         | 55%                      | 57.3%                    |
| Average time to Answer  | 42 Seconds                  | 11 Minutes               | 18 Minutes               |
| <b>Council Tax</b>      |                             |                          |                          |
| Service Level           | 55%                         | 3%                       | 1%                       |
| Total Calls Answered    | 91%                         | 45%                      | 63%                      |
| Average time to Answer  | 1.2Minutes                  | 17.4Minutes              | 26.5Minutes              |
| <b>Housing Benefits</b> |                             |                          |                          |
| Service Level           | 43%                         | 4%                       | 1%                       |
| Total Calls Answered    | 84%                         | 52%                      | 56%                      |
| Average time to Answer  | 1.5Minutes                  | 16.3Minutes              | 31.5Minutes              |

18. When heavily used individual phone paths e.g. Council Tax and Benefits are looked at, the impact of the lower and less experienced staffing level is much more apparent. The impact of this is that customers may be queueing for up to and on occasion beyond 2 hours on these specific phone paths at the busiest times of the day. The reason the overall average wait time is lower is because calls are handled more quickly on less technical phone paths e.g. the council switchboard where only signposting or transfer occurs.
19. There is no doubt that the pressures set out at paragraph 15 caused performance to deteriorate further during July 2022, but some recovery is expected as we move through the school summer holiday period. Table 2 below shows a snapshot for week commencing 8<sup>th</sup> August 2022 where average wait times have fallen on both the Council Tax and Benefits phone paths:

Table 2

| Description            | 8 <sup>th</sup> August 2022 |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Overall Calls</b>   |                             |
| Service Level          | 13.7%                       |
| Total Calls Answered   | 63.7%                       |
| Average time to Answer | 13 minutes                  |
| <b>Council Tax</b>     |                             |
| Service Level          | 4.9%                        |
| Total Calls Answered   | 67%                         |
| Average time to Answer | 21 minutes                  |

| <b>Housing Benefits</b> |            |
|-------------------------|------------|
| Service Level           | 1.8%       |
| Total Calls Answered    | 59.6%      |
| Average time to Answer  | 25 minutes |

20. Table 3 below provides detail of the call volumes at the end of Quarter 1 2022/23 in comparison to previous financial years (the July and August figures sit outside Quarter 1). Whilst the overall call volume has increased over the past 3 years it is still lower than 2019/20. What is noticeable is the increasing call volumes across key complex paths e.g. Council Tax and Benefits. Table 4 shows the increasing call volumes continuing into July (Quarter 2 2022/23).

Table 3

|                                 | <b>Quarter 1 phone calls</b> |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|                                 | <b>15/16</b>                 | <b>16/17</b> | <b>17/18</b> | <b>18/19</b> | <b>19/20</b> | <b>20/21</b> | <b>21/22</b> | <b>22/23</b> |
| Operators                       | 23048                        | 20590        | 20717        | 22719        | 20788        | 16021        | 15886        | <b>15522</b> |
| Council tax                     | 16691                        | 18125        | 11466        | 9354         | 9533         | 4248         | 7585         | <b>12915</b> |
| Benefits                        | 8114                         | 6912         | 6206         | 4694         | 4167         | 2611         | 2423         | <b>3400</b>  |
| Elections                       | 5541                         | 1762         | 3948         | 242          | 2346         | 78           | 1274         | <b>378</b>   |
| Parking                         | 5328                         | 4999         | 4443         | 4817         | 3312         | 1764         | 5214         | <b>6109</b>  |
| Concessionary travel            |                              | 1139         | 1081         | 894          | 737          | 362          | 1464         | <b>1405</b>  |
| Cans                            | 3281                         |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |
| Waste, highways and environment | 8956                         | 12591        | 11311        | 10322        | 11995        | 13554        | 14325        | <b>9405</b>  |
| Planning                        | 1740                         | 1571         | 2055         | 2027         | 2139         | 812          | 1431         | <b>1013</b>  |
| Registrars                      |                              |              |              | 6645         | 4477         | 1967         | 3293         | <b>3375</b>  |
| Energy rebate                   |                              |              |              |              |              |              |              | <b>2396</b>  |
| <b>Totals</b>                   | <b>72699</b>                 | <b>67689</b> | <b>61227</b> | <b>61714</b> | <b>59494</b> | <b>41417</b> | <b>52895</b> | <b>55918</b> |

21. In addition to call handling the Customer Centre also deals with several customer access channels within the existing staffing cohort. Table 4 below shows the work volumes for the first 4 months of the 2022/23 financial year:

Table 4

|  | <b>April<br/>2022</b> | <b>May<br/>2022</b> | <b>June<br/>2022</b> | <b>July<br/>2022</b> |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Emails   | 4,368                 | 4,865               | 4,259                | 3,813                |
| Webchat  | 0                     | 0                   | 0                    | 0                    |
| Calls  | 17,883                | 18,877              | 19,465               | 24,684               |
| In person sign-posted (incl. partner appointments) | 1,618                 | 1,783               | 1,981                | 1,755                |
| In person appointments (customer service)          | 123                   | 140                 | 189                  | 142                  |
| Business visitors                                  | 513                   | 894                 | 984                  | 912                  |

22. As mentioned at paragraph 21 Table 4 shows the increasing phone traffic this year through to the end of July. During the covid-19 crisis the Customer Centre also provided the help line support and signposting. It is also worth noting that due to the current level of resource the council tax pilot web-chat channel has been closed as there is insufficient staff to provide this service.

### **Summary**

23. The strategy of channel shifting residents online to provide 24/7 access continues and over time this should reduce the phone traffic in new areas such as waste. In addition, the use of multi-channel robotics is being looked at for use on council website and phone lines to deal with the most common queries raised by residents to further channel shift away from human-led phone calls and provide a more interactive 24/7 service. This again will allow available staff members to focus on those callers who cannot access other channels and to deal with more complex needs.

24. In the shorter term the rolling recruitment programme is starting to produce further candidates for the existing vacancies. The Customer Centre opening hours are also being brought in line with all council services in September 2022 moving from 8.30am – 5.30pm to 8.30am – 5pm. This is a small change but will help in ensuring better phone cover across the core part of the day in removing the need for multiple shift patterns worked by staff and it will also help with staff morale.

### **Consultation**

25. There are no decisions in this report that have required consultation. Staff comments are from a staff survey undertaken in 2021.

### **Options**

26. Members can choose to simply note the report or develop thoughts for further scrutiny enquiries or reports.

### **Analysis**

27. There is no analysis as there is no formal council decision to be made on the content of the report.

### **Council Plan**

28. This work contributes to the following Council Plan priorities:
- Safe communities and culture for all
  - An open and effective council.

### **Implications**

29.

**Financial** There are no financial implications

**Human Resources (HR)** There are no HR implications other than the ongoing implications for staff of the matters reported here.

**Equalities** There are no Equality implications.

**Legal** No implications

**Crime and Disorder, Information Technology and Property** No implications



## Risk Management

30. There are no risks associated with this report. The performance problems currently are an issue and are being managed through recruitment. Further risk mitigation is to continue to use recruitment and retention strategies, plus further automation including the use of robotics and digitalisation of waste services for residents.

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**Report Approved**



**Date** 22/08/2022

**Specialist Implications Officer(s):** None

**Wards Affected:**

**All**



**For further information please contact the author of the report**

**Background Papers:** None

**Annex A:** Service Levels.