

**Customer & Corporate Services Scrutiny
Management Committee**

6 March 2023

Report of the Director, Customer & Communities

Customer Centre Telephone Performance Update

Summary

1. This report provides Customer & Corporate Services Scrutiny Management Committee with an update on the progress made by the Customer Services phone centre in improving performance since the October 2022 scrutiny report (available here: <https://democracy.york.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=144&MId=13831&Ver=4>).

Recommendation

2. Members of the Committee are asked to note the report.

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

Background

3. The October 2022 report provided the background as to why the excellent customer performance prior and during the covid pandemic had deteriorated from the late summer of 2021 and into 2022. Since the report there has been a significant improvement in performance as the Customer Centre moves back towards pre-covid service levels, the details of which are set out below.
4. The proactive recruitment campaign run by customer services and supported by Human Resources has continued to fill Customer Service Representative (CSR) vacancies. The service has also

worked hard in delivering its formal training and development programme for all new starters. The priority of Customer Services has been to continue to improve its overall performance especially the quality of the phone service to residents.

5. Whilst there have been ongoing challenges as described below, staff within Customer Services have been working hard to provide a high quality and professional service to all the city's residents.

The Service & Workforce

6. Members of the Committee are reminded that the Customer Centre is the main point of contact for all residents by phone, face to face and web chat. There are other calls that do not go through customer services, and these include those for Housing, Adult Social Care, and direct dial calls to council officers. The phone paths cover the following services:

- Switchboard
- Council Tax
- Housing Benefit
- Waste
- Highways
- Environment
- Registrars
- Electoral
- Concessionary Travel
- Parking
- Planning

7. The last report to this Committee highlighted the high level of vacancies in the service with 7 full time equivalent (FTE) vacancies and 3 recruited to but not in post in October 2022. As of 15 February 2023, the number of vacancies is now just 1.4 and the number recruited to but not in post is 6. This demonstrates the improved effectiveness of recruitment campaigns over the intervening months.
8. The complexity and length of calls has continued to increase during the Cost-of-Living Crisis which has included the provision of support for customers to complete online forms for the financial support schemes and other online processes.
9. The matter of abusive calls was highlighted in the last report, and it is perhaps useful for members to understand the existing process in

place for such calls, particularly as this was subject to an agreed action in the approved council motion at Full Council on 15 December 2022 which asked that the following be implemented:

‘monitoring and recording of abusive calls to staff, including a clear structure for escalation, response and staff well-being support.’

10. The routine process for managing such calls is documented and CSRs are trained in managing different behaviours to help put the customer at ease and diffuse the situation. When a CSR receives an ‘abusive’ call that has caused them concern however, they should inform their Team Manager that they have had a difficult call. The Manager will usually listen to a recording of the call and provide the appropriate support required along with any ongoing training. All calls are recorded and whilst staff should also report this type of call on the council’s B-safe Health & Safety (H&S) system to trigger a H&S investigation there is not always the time between calls or at the end of the day to do this. It has been reinforced that staff should report such instances on B-safe in line with the council’s formal H&S ‘Violence & Aggression Compliance Note’ – the result of which could result in a number of actions including that the aggressor is formally written to.
11. A survey of such calls/contacts was undertaken week commencing 23 January 2023 with the CSR team and the number registered was two – one face to face and one over the phone, the latter relating to welfare support. With the increase in available staff and reduced queues the call wait times have fallen substantially since the summer and improved performance arising from this. As there are currently no long wait times on the phone paths customers appear not to be as frustrated, and this is also reflected in the customer satisfaction scores (see below).
12. Introducing an in-call process to deal with difficult and abusive calls would be an ideal next step to achieve improvements to the process. To do this both the Customer Relationship Management IT system and phone system would need to be looked at and further developed to allow this. This is a longer-term solution and resources/funding would need to be identified for this purpose.
13. Notwithstanding this longer-term objective, a Group Risk Assessment is being planned in conjunction with the council’s Health & Safety Team to ensure all possible mitigations are in place along with well-being support. The risk assessment will be drawn up with all staff and all customer channels and will be monitored on a regular basis.

14. It is a positive that the improved performance helps both CSRs and customers, however forecasting ahead the service is still light in its staffing levels and with annual Council Tax and Business Rates billing and elections with heavy call volumes due in the coming months, the issue needs to be and will be continuously monitored.

Performance

15. The overall performance has slowly improved since the summer of 2022. This is in part due to a lower vacancy factor but also a lower volume of phone traffic as shown in Table 1 below. The volume of phone calls received tends to be cyclical driven by major council interactions with residents for example: Annual Council Tax Billing, Council Tax Reminders, Election Canvass, and then one-off unexpected call volume increases across the year such as new processes being introduced, or a major incident (flooding). It is also likely that some traffic reductions are due to new systems settling down and some customers requiring less support.
16. The Quarter 3 (Q3) winter period tends to be quieter unless there is a major weather event and in addition this year the December council tax court hearing was postponed which further reduced call volumes. Table 1 shows the improved performance but also the reduced call volumes moving into Quarter 4 2022/23 which is not expected to last given the known coming pressures outlined in the paragraph above.

Table 1

Customer Services	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4 To 27th Jan 2023
Calls Offered	56,253	59,338	38,714	10,539
% of calls answered	75.2%	68.7%	88.9%	92.1%
Average Speed of answer	8 mins 11 secs	9 mins 17 secs	4 mins 5 secs	3 mins 12 secs

17. Looking at performance in a little more detail and providing a comparator to July 2022 Table 2 below provides a comparison as at w/c 9 January 2023:

Table 2

Description	9 January 2023	11 July 2022
Overall Calls		
Service Level*	61.5%	4.4%
Total Calls Answered	94.7%	57.3%

Average time to Answer	2 Minutes	18 Minutes
Council Tax		
Service Level*	26.3%	1%
Total Calls Answered	86.9%	63%
Average time to Answer	6 Minutes	26.5 Minutes
Housing Benefits		
Service Level*	22.3%	1%
Total Calls Answered	84.1%	56%
Average time to Answer	6 Minutes	31.5 Minutes

*Service level is calls answered within 20 seconds.

18. The information in Table 2 clearly shows the improvement in performance since the summer of 2022 and reflects the quarterly improvement shown at Table 1. Whilst performance is not yet back at pre-covid levels it is moving in the right direction. The average customer satisfaction weekly since the start of the year (2023) is 82%.
19. At the meeting of this Committee on 9 January 2023 further questions were asked and phone traffic details requested (Quarter 2 Finance & Performance Report) regarding longest call wait times and quartiles. The information on phone traffic comes from a system which provides aggregated reporting, rather than access to raw data on individual calls. Due to the challenges this presents this data is not available for this meeting.
20. During this calendar year, investigatory work will be conducted by the council's Business Intelligence team to determine the database and reporting processes needed to access the raw information that sits behind phone traffic information, to provide the type of information being requested.

Other activities to improve performance

21. The use of robotics continues is being looked at for use on the council website (and a pilot implementation under way) and busiest phone paths to deal with the most common queries raised by residents to further channel shift away from in person phone calls and provide a more interactive 24/7 service. This will also free up capacity to support non-digital customers.
22. Once the service is fully resourced and trained, the 'call back' functionality will be turned back on hopefully by late spring or early summer 2023.

23. The retention of staff is important, and the management team continue to provide training and support sessions every Thursday morning.

Consultation

24. There are no decisions in this report that have required consultation.

Options

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

Analysis

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

Council Plan

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

Implications

28.

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

29. There are no risks associated with this report. The performance risks are being managed through recruitment and retention policies. Further risks relating to Health & Safety risks are being managed on an ongoing basis and will be further improved by actions outlined in this report.

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Report Approved



Date

20/2/2023

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Wards Affected:

All



For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

Last Customer Centre Performance Report - 3 October 2022:

<https://democracy.york.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=144&MId=13831&Ver=4>

Full Council Motion relating to the Customer Centre – 15 December 2022:

<https://democracy.york.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=64137>