



Report To: Scrutiny and Overview Committee

16 January 2014

Lead Officer: Alex Colyer - Executive Director Corporate Services

Contact Centre Annual Performance Review

Purpose

1. To present to Scrutiny and Overview Committee the contact centre performance (Appendix A) for information and comment.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that the report be noted.

Reasons for Recommendations

3. This report provides a review of the first year's operation of the contact centre following its launch on 3 December 2012. The performance of the contact centre team has been reported on a monthly basis from January 2013 following its launch in December 2012. The annual performance figures are set out at **Appendix A**.

Background

4. During 2010 Scrutiny and Overview Committee led a member and officer task and finish group which looked at options to provide a modern, integrated customer contact centre with improved customer service and flexible options and provide savings of around £250,000 per year. The outcome of the review was to procure a flexible/agile cloud software contact centre solution and provide the service in house at the Council's headquarters at Cambourne.
5. The Council conducted an extensive procurement exercise to ensure that an appropriate Cloud software solution could be implemented within the tight timescales required. The software selected has the ability to allow the contact centre service to be scaled up or down; an example of this was when the contact service was scaled up between February and May 2013 to allow more calls to be taken from residents who were affected by welfare reform changes to housing benefit and council tax support.
6. The Council employed a business analyst to design and implement the business processes for the Contact Centre and to assess the staffing and rota requirements for the new service. This was done by reviewing the extensive data provided by County Council with regard to the service they were providing together with the County Council's documented operating processes.
7. While a significant proportion of staff required for the new service transferred from the County Council's employment, a rigorous recruitment and selection process was undertaken to fill the remaining vacancies in the team. This involved a strong emphasis on recruiting staff who demonstrated an aptitude for contact centre work with an ability to learn rather than any existing competency in a contact centre environment.

8. On 3 December 2012 the new contact centre was launched at South Cambridgeshire Hall, following the end of the contract with Cambridgeshire County Council.

Considerations

9. The Council's contact centre is in its infancy and there have been some significant successes, namely that the predicted cost savings have been achieved and an improved first time call resolution of 80% has been achieved. The team have worked well together to achieve a good start, but there are improvements which need to be made to push on with the service and implement more options to encourage channel shift.
10. As anticipated, the new team has been very successful in becoming a recruitment area for those looking to launch a career within local government but, there have been a larger than expected number of contact centre staff who have taken the opportunity to continue their career development within the Council and have transferred to other roles within SCDC. This should be seen as a positive outcome for the Council as these members of staff have an all-round knowledge of council services which gives them a distinct advantage when they transfer to their new roles. It is also a reflection on the calibre of staff recruited. It has, however, put pressure on the team at times in terms of service delivery in terms of available staffing and unproductive time due to unplanned recruitment and training requirements.
11. Unfortunately the software has not been as robust as expected which has led to significant performance issues at times. These include calls being dropped before being answered and, more significantly, periods when the system has been unavailable. The software supplier's customer base has increased at a significantly high level and this may have contributed to the system being not as robust as anticipated. Performance has now improved and management are working with the software supplier to provide an improved business continuity solution when the system is unavailable due to ICT technical problems.
12. The business processes for the contact centre service, together with the staffing requirements and rotas were designed based on data from the County Council. This data appeared robust, although in retrospect it perhaps lacked the fine detail required to accurately predict service demand peaks and troughs. This data also suggested average call times of 2.5 minutes whereas our contact centre has consistently operated at around 5 minutes per call.
13. In part, the longer average call times have been generated by fewer calls being transferred to the back office as, in line with the business plan, the team's ethos has been to attempt to resolve as many queries at first point of contact as possible without the need to transfer calls to the back office. This has certainly been a success for the team with first time call resolution running at 80% compared with the previous service level of 60%.
14. The introduction of the contact centre and their improved first time call resolution has had a knock on effect to back office teams. This can be clearly seen when looking at the Benefits Teams' performance. Despite the welfare reform changes and the introduction of Localised Council Tax Support (LCTS) and an all time high demand for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP), the Benefits Teams' processing times for claims are the lowest since 2005, with new claims average processing time at 14.7 days which compares with 19.73 days for 2012/13.

15. The number of benefit changes and new claims processed is at an all-time high but performance is excellent. The contact centre and benefits team have worked together to manage the impact of the welfare reforms and additional customer contact advisors employed were employed during the exceptionally busy time between February and May 2013.
16. The service now provided by SCDC is, therefore, significantly different to the previous provision and, with the other factors described above, have contributed to some higher than originally anticipated call wait times for residents.
17. In response, the team have and will continue to work to implement changes to the service design and operation to minimise call wait times. The current plan focuses on a number of areas building on the successes of the contact centre but looking at areas where key improvements are necessary. The main themes are:-
 - 1) Coaching and training to manage down
 - a. Call lengths
 - b. Call wrap up times
 - 2) Channel Shift Plan / Strategy
 - 3) Resource planning / use of resources, and
 - 4) Improvements to general administration of the service
18. In the meantime, additional contact centre advisors have been recruited on a temporary basis until the end of May 2014 which will enable the team to cope in the short term with the additional calls due to expected in March and April which relate to new council tax bills, rent increases as well as giving some extra capacity during the initial months of the improvement plan.

Implications

19. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk management, equality and diversity, climate change, community safety and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered:

Financial

20. The budget for 2013/14 is on target to deliver the agreed savings. There are significant budget pressures for 2014/15 if the current average call length is not reduced. The improvement plan will look to address this issue.

Staffing

21. The impact to staffing will be evaluated within the improvement plan for 2014

Risk Management

22. The current measures in place with regard to temporary staff will mitigate the risk with regard to performance. The risk management of the service is significant feature of the necessity to have a 2014 improvement plan.

Effect on Strategic Aims

Aim 1 – We Listen and engage with residents, parishes and businesses to ensure that we deliver first class services and value for money

23. The contact centre has provided an improved service to residents at a substantially reduced cost.

Background papers

No Background Papers were relied upon in the writing of this report.

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