

**Report To:** Scrutiny and Overview Committee 16 July 2019  
**Lead Officer:** Peter Maddock  
**Lead Member** Philippa Hart

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## **Customer Contact Service Performance**

### **Purpose**

1. To present to Scrutiny and Overview Committee a performance report (**Appendix A**) for information and comment.

### **Recommendations**

2. It is recommended that the information provided be noted.

### **Reasons for Recommendations**

3. The report provides a review of the operational performance of the Customer Contact Service.

### **Background**

4. Scrutiny and Overview Committee has from time to time reviewed the operational performance of the Customer Contact Service since the service returned in house in December 2012.
5. On the 4 December 2002 the Council entered into a contract with Cambridgeshire County Council, for the provision of a contact centre service for a period of ten years at an off-site location in St Ives.
6. The Council conducted a review of the options during 2010-2011 and the outcome following the completion of the review was to bring the service back in-house and to achieve a £250K reduction in cost.
7. The new service model aimed to provide a service where customers would be able to resolve their queries in the majority of cases at first point of contact; this represented a change from the previous contract where a high number of calls were processed via a switchboard service and onwards to back office staff.
8. The service at Cambourne was launched in December 2012 and, whilst performance in terms of the number of calls answered and resolved at first point of contact has been consistently good, the time taken to answer calls and the number of calls answered has been variable.
9. The targets agreed for performance currently are :-
  - 85% calls answered
  - 80% calls answered at first point of contact (no longer reported corporately)

- 100% of calls answered within 2 Minutes (Performance information available is based on average)

### **Considerations**

10. There are a number of challenges which have recently affected the operational performance of the customer contact service as follows:

#### **a) Recruitment**

Owing to the “whole Council” knowledge acquired by the customer contact service staff it has historically been a recognised starting point for some employees who after a period of time within the customer contact service move on to other roles within SCDC. This has generally been held to be a good model for career progression within SCDC

For this reason, the turnover of staff is high and although this approach has been highly successful in recruiting excellent staff members who have taken on new roles within the back office teams. The customer contact service as a result is continuously recruiting and training new staff. The recruitment process can take between 1 and 2 months and training normally is around 3 months; during this training period advisors are not able to take calls from all service areas

The service has been busy with recruitment during the last year and this has resulted in the customer contact team not being fully staffed for some longer periods of time. The employment market is strong and there is a competitive market for those applicants with skill sets required within the customer contact service and numbers of suitable applicants have been at a lower level than previously.

There has been a high number of team members who have left the customer contact service on temporary or permanent basis during the last year to continue with their careers :-

- 5 Advisors taking roles within back office at SCDC on secondment
- 4 Advisors obtained permanent new roles within SCDC back office
- 1 Advisor on a career break
- 4 Advisors left SCDC, 2 before completion of probation period

There are currently 23 FTE roles within the customer contact service.

#### **b) ICT**

There have been a number of issues which can be attributed to ICT which have affected customer contact service performance during the first quarter of 2019/20

- Voice Mail  
The disruption to voice mail has resulted in additional calls and visitors to the council being made by those who would normally leave voice messages. The voice mail facilities have been difficult to resolve and have recently been resolved following 2 previous failed attempts.

- **Email**  
There have been outstanding issues with generic email addresses where service areas have been unable to access these email, again this has been recently resolved.
- **Self Service Portal**  
These portals which are in the reception have been unavailable for significant periods during the first quarter of 2019/20.
- **Benefits online calculator**  
The calculator has been unavailable following the introduction of Banded Localised Council Tax Support Scheme resulting in more calls to the customer contact service. A new calculator is currently being tested by benefits team prior to it being added to the website.

### **c) Additional services provided by the customer contact service**

There has been a transfer of some responsibilities to the customer contact service team during 2018/2019 which has had an impact on the resources available. These include:-

- **Complaints Handling Administration**

This function was previously undertaken by the Executive Assistant and was transferred to the customer contact service following the post holder moving to a role within Environmental Health.

Management of complaints forms part of the council's digital project and is currently in progress: the new digital process via the Customer Portal will have increased automation which will result in a reduced levels of manual administration. The customer contact service is working with the digital team on this project.

- **Printing and Reprographics**

This service was transferred to the customer contact service following a reorganisation of the communications and facilities team.

The current service requirements have resulted in a need for a higher level of resource requirement than was anticipated prior to the reorganisation; it is estimated that at least an additional 1/2 FTE is required to service the current requirements. It is expected that in the medium term the level of resource could be reduced if some proactive work was undertaken to reduce the amount of printing.

- **Customer Portal**

A team leader from the customer contact service has been seconded one day a week to interface with the digital team to assist in populating the Customer Portal with online services which will in due course lead to fewer contacts, both visits to SCDC and phone calls, by residents.

## **Service Performance**

11. Performance Information (Appendix A) attached
12. The current software has limitations as to the reports provided and majority of the reports which are provided are set with averages only no actual data is provided by the software provider.
13. A bench-marking exercise is currently being undertaken with neighbouring local Authorities to compare performance and staffing ratios. The benchmarking exercise is still in progress and not yet complete; early indications seem to indicate that SCDC performance is comparable to others with similar ratio of calls per advisor when fully staffed.

The performance issues which have been experienced directly correspond to periods when the customer contact service has been experiencing staffing vacancies or absences or has a higher number of new staff members.

## **Service Improvements**

14. A number of initiatives are being undertaken to recruit and retain staff within the customer contact service and to ensure that the team has the appropriate number of staff.

These initiatives include:-

- Using additional specialist recruitment websites to increase numbers of quality Job applicants
  - Review of the Job Description to ensure that experience is considered in an equal way to the possession of formal qualifications.
  - Introduction of Career Grade Structure within the customer contact service
    - Apprenticeship
    - Advisor
    - Senior Advisor Role
    - Team Leader
    - Manager
  - Service Leads
  - Part time advisor roles
  - A rolling quarterly recruitment processes for customer contact service to reduce staff vacancies
  - Consideration of a “Golden Hello” payment for advisors
  - Individual training needs analysis to be completed and provision of training
  - Benchmarking exercise with other Local Authorities regarding pay, conditions etc.
  - Consideration of remote working
  - Review of secondments within SCDC
14. A training needs questionnaire is currently being completed by advisors will inform this training programme. The training programme will be designed to ensure the programme is focussed in the first place on the service areas where advisors feel less

confident. It is anticipated that there should be a reduction in call handling times following tailored training and a period of consolidation.

15. A combined security and front of house role will be introduced to the reception which will enable visitors to be effectively triaged without the need to stand in a queue at reception.

Those visitors who come to SCDC for a meeting will receive security passes and invited to wait in a dedicated waiting area until a member of staff collects them. Those attending meetings in rooms with public access will be directed to the appropriate room.

Those needing to see a member of back office staff will be asked the reason for their visit and invited to sit until the specialist staff member can see them.

Visitors who can self-serve will be asked if they wish to use the self serve points and given assistance is necessary. They will be invited to register with the customer Portal (if not already signed up).

16. As a result of service area activities which are not effectively communicated to the Contact Centre there continues to be occasions where there are some unexpected spikes in personal visitors or calls. The newly introduced service leads will work with service areas to improve communication where necessary to ensure activities are planned more effectively and reduce the occasions where this happens.
17. The team will also work together with service areas to look at options to reduce back logs of work: this has already worked very successfully within the Council Tax team. The customer contact service team agreed on one afternoon a week not to transfer calls to the Council tax team thereby allowing them to work without the interruptions of telephone calls. This approach enabled a back log to be reduced and as result fewer residents needed to telephone SCDC to chase up correspondence.
18. The Contact Centre Service will continue to work closely with the digital team to promote channel shift by residents and staff to digital options and for this reason looking at the medium term it is anticipated that the time taken to deal with each telephone call may increase as the overall number of calls decreases i.e. the percentage of simple calls decrease, and the percentage of more complicated calls increases.
19. For some customers we recognise that they will always prefer to access council services either by visiting the council offices or by telephoning and we are committed to providing an excellent service for these methods of contacting the Council.
20. In writing the report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk management, equality and diversity, climate change, community safety and other key issues, the following implications have been considered:-

## **Effect on Strategic Aims**

**A modern and caring Council – We will provide our customers with high-quality services, strive to reduce costs, build on what we are good at to generate our own income and make decisions in a transparent, open and inclusive way**

21. The in-house customer contact service aims to provide a high-quality and cost-efficient service to SCDC residents, putting our residents at the center of what we do.

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