

Appendix 1 – Response to the Scrutiny Inquiry report on reducing repeat customer contact through tackling failure demand.

Scrutiny Recommendations	Directorate Response
<p>Desired Outcome That an effective process is developed to ensure that customers receive the right housing repair work first time.</p> <p>Recommendation 1 That the Director of Communities and Environment engages with Scrutiny on the findings arising from the co-location pilot scheme involving housing repair specialist staff at the Contact Centre and in determining longer term options for ensuring that customers obtain the right housing repair work done first time.</p>	<p>Accept the recommendation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The initial three month period for the co-location pilot scheme has been extended for a further three months. There has already been a reduction in work queues to responsive repairs as CSOs are able to access specialist advice and service updates while the customer is still on the phone. • A plan is in place to train CSOs in booking damp inspections, which are currently the biggest single reason for a CSO contacting responsive repairs. The customer will get the correct appointment (either a repair or an inspection) at first point of contact and there will be less follow up work for responsive repairs. • Work is underway with Mears looking at the high number of repairs booked with incorrect SOR codes and how this can be improved through a mixture of better diagnostics by CSO (see below) and correct codes accessible in Orchard. • Officers from Customer Services and Officers from Responsive Repairs are meeting regularly to improve the repairs guidance in the workbook. Move from team/ council focused to customer/diagnostic focused.

Desired Outcome

That Customer Service Officers and customers are kept regularly informed of progress in dealing with service requests and are notified immediately of any significant changes that may impact on initial service expectations.

Recommendation 2

That the Director of Communities and Environment leads on undertaking a review of existing customer service processes and procedures, including the use of the Contact Centre workbook scripts, to identify potential improvements that will better align service processes with communication links to Customer Service Officers and also directly with the customer.

It is expected that the key targeted service areas be prioritised as part of this review and that particular focus is also given to maximising the use of modern communication technologies when communicating with customers.

Accept the recommendation

- We are working closely with the project team for the new customer portal to ensure that customers and CSOs will have access to timely updates and progress. When reviewing procedures greater consideration is now given to customer communication and ensuring that this is captured within scripts.
- Work is underway to find a replacement platform for the workbook which will feature time sensitive and temporary updates alongside permanent guidance.
- A list of areas that are scheduled for planned works are now available online for customers and CSOs.

Desired Outcome

These mechanisms are put in place to ensure that customers receive timely notifications of any service assessment appointments and planned works.

Recommendation 3

That the Director of Communities and Environment leads on undertaking a review of the Council's automated systems of sending notification letters and also seeks to maximise the use of modern communication technologies, including text alerts or emails, to speed up notifications to customers in relation to any assessment appointments and planned works.

Accept the recommendation

- It was acknowledged during the enquiry workshops that repair confirmation letters for emergency repairs are particularly unhelp to customers as they arrived after the repair is completed. This function has now been turned off in the repairs ordering system.
- Right to Repair legislation requires confirmation letters for repair appointments to be sent out and therefore the function will not be turned off for non-emergency repairs. However, through the project to replace the current repairs ordering system, the use of more innovative notifications (text and email) is being developed.

Desired Outcome

That appropriate resources are put in place to undertake the task of effectively simplifying benefit notification letters to customers.

Recommendation 4

That the Director of Communities and Environment leads on looking at the feasibility of establishing a task force with the appropriate software and legal expertise to focus on finding an effective means of simplifying existing benefit notification letters that will not be open to legal challenge.

Accept the recommendation

A clear objective was set to review all key customer letters and notifications and make appropriate changes to simplify the wording, in order to reduce avoidable and repeat contact. This work is progressing well. A target has been set to reduce avoidable contact where we can, by April. A major piece of work has been undertaken to overhaul Benefit notifications. Examples of the changes that have been made are as follows:

- 37 paragraphs have been amended, fixing either faults or to make the notification simpler for the customer and less confusing.
- All letters now only (and rightly) request that customers tell us about their income changes when the claim is still “live and in payment”.
- Appeal rights on all letters are now consistent for each tenure type.
- An “age related” program review has been carried out and this has resulted in a reduction of 8,000 notifications being issued per year. Most of these were issued where there was no change to entitlement and legislation did not force us to notify the customer. These letters have also been reviewed to make them more understandable for the customer.
- Extensive work has been completed on the landlord letters. Information on overpayments is much clearer and explains why recovery is being made from them. The landlord notifications now promote a link to the council’s website, enabling landlords to access additional information held for their tenants.
- In addition to the above, a number of changes have been made to the Council Tax Bills to help reduce avoidable contact (e.g. nil balance bills), help explain how their bill is calculated and signpost charge-payers to additional information.

Further work is intended to actually summarise the benefit notification but this is subject to a much wider piece of work around customer self-service. Whilst provisional work is underway, realistic progress is not likely to be made until the second half of this financial year. As this will

require extensive testing, go live of such may not actually be until 2018/19.

Good practical examples of changes made include:

- Previously notification letters were sent out to customers informing them that there was no change to the amounts payable. This caused confusion amongst customers and caused unnecessary telephone contact. These “no change notifications are no longer sent out, which will have a big impact on reducing avoidable contact.
- The wording in letters to customers regarding Council tax support and housing benefit has been improved so that they are much clearer. For example:
 1. Council tax support and housing benefit statements were often confused by customers as a bill they needed to pay the wording has been changed to state “This is not a bill, this is a statement, and you have nothing to pay”.
 2. Letters regarding changes to benefit calculations and customers entitlements which is changing in accordance with bedroom requirement policies. For example the amount of benefit payable when children reach five and ten changes, these letters are now much clearer, giving customers a good understanding of why their benefit amount have been altered.
 3. The wording in letters regarding the “single room exemption” and effect on customers has also been simplified.

Desired Outcome

That the Council's Interactive Voice Response telephony system continues to be development and remains fit for purpose?

Recommendation 5

That the Director of Communities and Environment undertakes a review of the Council's current Interactive Voice Response telephony system to identify possible improvements, including the feasibility of introducing a voice telephone input option as part of the system.

Accept the recommendation:

The current IVR menu has been amended to ensure that we direct customer calls quickly and easily to the appropriate officer within the contact centre.

Changes:

- The Leeds Housing Options(LHO) IVR menu has been merged with the main Housing Leeds menu to ensure that all housing contact is delivered via one IVR process and enables all call types to be captured and directed quickly and concisely.
- The Housing Leeds menu now includes divert out to LHO, Benefits and Choice Based Lettings options preventing unnecessary transfer for customers and ensuing these are dealt with by the dedicated trained staff where needed
- The new LHO menu ensures emergency cases are informed of correct concise steps to follow, now promotes additional contact methods of drop in sessions and advises of timescales for cases
- The Choice Based Lettings menu option links direct to information capture for housing forms. This releases CSO time on the phone lines as these form requests can be completed out of hours
- The wording has been updated on all areas of the menu with clear advice and information for a better customer experience
- There is also appropriate signposting to the website for further information where appropriate

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unnecessary information has been removed and transferred to the web with qualifying audio links • Further work has been planned in to review the contractor information that is provided as part of the IVR menu. • The option to provide a voice-activated system to direct customers to the appropriate menu options and person to speak to is been explored. The facility is available, but we are assessing the costs and associated benefits with installing such a feature. • There is a greater customer focus with less recorded information and options are based on identifiers that customers will understand (postcode), rather than what is meaningful to council (contractor).
<p>Desired Outcome That the Council progresses to implement an electronic application form for Council Tax Support, Housing Benefit and Free School Meals that will enable more claims to be dealt with at the first point of contact.</p> <p>Recommendation 6 That the Director of Communities and Environment progresses to withdraw paper benefit claim forms once an electronic form is in place and an effective customer service support network is also in place to ensure that customers have access to appropriate support with their online claim applications which leads to more claims being dealt with at the first point of contact.</p>	<p>Accept the recommendation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work is underway to implement an electronic application form for Council Tax Support, Housing Benefit and Free School Meals. • A project board has been set up to create a Digital Centre of Excellence for Council Tax and Benefits. The first three priorities being looked at are: e Claim for benefits, landlords online and Council Tax discounts and exemptions product. • “Benefits e-claim” software has been procured and the Council’s preferred provider is expected to commence work from 10th July 2017. It is planned that the software be deployed into “live” by the end of September 2017.

Desired Outcome

That all landlords are effectively using the Landlord Portal to access relevant information.

Recommendation 7

That the Director of Communities and Environment progresses to adopting a mandatory self-serve approach for all landlords to access relevant information through the Landlords Portal and not via the Contact Centre.

Accept the recommendation

- Within the next two to three months, the telephone support line that assists landlords on direct payment with queries regarding housing benefit of their tenants will only give advice to landlords on how to access the information they need online. Advice calls regarding tenants' payments and benefits will no longer be provided over the phone. Improvements in promoting the landlord portal are being made to facilitate this channel shift so landlords are aware of the information they can access online.

- **Landlord Portal:**

The landlord portal has been in use for a number of years, a number of landlords already subscribe to this. The aim is to promote the portal, by means of changes to the webpages and creating a user guide to assist landlords in registering and using the portal.

- In order to ensure a smooth channel shift of enquiries an effective marketing plan is in place to enable effective communication to all landlords so they are fully briefed and adequately prepared for this change. An overview of the portal functionality has been provided for telephone customer service officers and further overviews are planned for front-facing customer service officers. This will ensure that it is suitably promoted at the point a landlord contacts the Council. A user guide has been drafted and web content has been redesigned (but not yet put to "live"). The process for a landlord registering for the portal has been improved to allow speedier access. The email auto response system which sign posts landlords online will remain in place.
- **IVR:** An IVR message which will be on the landlord line which will divert landlords to go online for their queries is being developed. This will make it clear that the phone line is only for online support and not for general advice on tenant's information. The IVR will include sign posting information for non-online enquires e.g. where landlords can access support via the LCC website for further information. A briefing will be provided to all CSO's who currently deal with landlord enquiries so that they are fully aware of the channel shift etc.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements to correspondence to landlords (letters and notifications regarding council tax and benefits) : Some improvements have been made to the notifications sent to landlords to simplify the processes and information they receive. Examples of these improvements are as follows; • Landlord adjustment notification: Landlord notification has been amended so that the reason for the adjustment/ cancellation is at the top of the letter, and all duplication for the reason for the overpayment or underpayment has been removed. • Landlord Cessation notification: Landlord cessation notification previously only displayed overpayments which were made recoverable from the landlord. However, where the landlord has been overpaid they will now be notified of this and advised who we will be seeking recovery from e.g. landlord or tenant. • Landlord cessation letter: Has now been amended to say the claim has been cancelled rather than stopped.
<p>Desired Outcome That Customer Service Officers are empowered to use their discretion and seek additional advice when dealing with potentially complex cases.</p> <p>Recommendation 8 That the Director of Communities and Environment takes the lead in undertaking a review of existing Contact Centre procedures to provide a greater degree of flexibility in the approaches taken by Customer Service Officers so that they feel empowered to use their discretion and seek additional advice when dealing with potentially complex cases.</p>	<p>Accept the recommendation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work is underway with service managers in both housing and council tax & benefits to identify escalated calls / complaints which are generated through the inability of a CSO to carry out a particular task. We are challenging those areas where we feel more discretion should be given to CSOs, and we have escalation procedures for dealing with complex cases. The Head of Customer Contact meets with other heads of service and chief officers on a regular basis to address issues and immediate problems can generally be dealt with through a phone call. • Examples where we have empowered Housing CSOs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Increasing rent arrears that CSOs can deal with from £200 to £400

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ All CSOs to book their own damp inspections (in progress) ○ CSOs to take upfront payment for rechargeable lock repairs (in progress)
<p>Desired Outcome That an appropriate options appraisal is undertaken regarding the introduction of a dedicated route of communication for Elected Members to escalate complex cases that have come to their attention.</p> <p>Recommendation 9 That the Director of Communities and Environment leads on undertaking an options appraisal based around the suggestion of introducing a dedicated route of communication for Elected Members to escalate particular complex cases that have come to their attention. Once completed, this is to be shared with Scrutiny for further consideration.</p>	<p>Accept the recommendation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There is currently a dedicated route of communication for elected members who wish to escalate any complex housing cases: Housing.leeds.mp.and.members.enquiries@leeds.gov.uk ● Related process flows for Housing Leeds to deal with enquiries to this inbox were agreed with Cllr Coupar approximately 18 months ago and shared with members along with full contact list of Housing Managers. This list has since been updated and recirculated. ● We await further recommendation if options appraisal is still required.
<p>Desired Outcome That appropriate investment is made into robust customer service data collection and analysis to inform longer term strategic planning.</p> <p>Recommendation 10 That the Director of Communities and Environment works with the Director of Resources and Housing to explore opportunities for further investment into robust customer service data collection and analysis to assist with longer term strategic planning.</p>	<p>Accept the recommendation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Investment into this will be developed and done so by gaining feedback from customers via the “Voice of the Customer work”. This work will be commenced once the work is complete on providing a replacement system to prepare for the decommissioning of Seibel.