

Contact Centre

Date: February 2022

Report of: Neil Evans Director of Resources

Report to: Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board

Will the decision be open for call in? Yes No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? Yes No

What is this report about?

Including how it contributes to the city's and council's ambitions

- This report provides an overview of the performance of the contact centre and the work that is being undertaken to improve the end-to-end customer experience, address the issues that create avoidable contact and support service areas to ensure that council services are delivered in the most cost-effective way.
- From 1st January to 31st December 2021, the contact centre received 1.4 million calls and handled approximately 159k emails from customers. This report outlines the improvement and transformation work that is ongoing to deliver an efficient, accessible and customer focussed contact centre operation that is well equipped to support the outcomes of the Best Council Plan.

Recommendations

- a) To note the current performance of the contact centre and the work that is being undertaken to improve the end-to-end customer experience and ensure that contact centre services are delivered in the most cost-effective way with a clear focus on delivering high quality services for our customers.
- b) To request that a further paper is presented to this Board in July 2022, tracking the progress made against the actions detailed in this report.

Why is the proposal being put forward?

Current Performance

- 1 The contact centre is the first point of contact for many of our customers or partners when they have a query or require a service from the council. During the period from 1st January 2021 to 31st December 2021, the contact centre handled 159k email enquiries (163k during the same period in 2020/21 and 154k in 2019/20) and received around 1.428 million

telephone calls (1.399 million were received during the same period in 2020/21 and approximately 1.334 million in 2019/20).

- The contact centre handles emails and telephone calls from citizens and service users relating to a wide range of services provided by the Council. Table 1 provides an overview of the telephone lines that are managed by the contact centre and the gross number of calls received over the last three years.

Table 1: Gross calls received

Telephone line	Gross calls received		
	2021	2020	2019
Adult Social Care	52,170	46,692	54,434
Anti-Social Behaviour	10,205	11,626	7,776
Benefits	80,027	92,388	112,509
Blue Badge	17,062	15,699	35,259
Choice Based Lettings	56,155	95,607	73,027
Child Social Care	14,102	13,503	13,751
Covid eligibility	104	886	-
Council Tax General	208,376	193,319	209,827
Council Tax Reminders	49,117	47,635	51,052
Elections	27,561	15,433	29,124
Golden Number	92,238	119,019	81,289
Highways	31,102	25,240	28,566
Housing Leeds	257,033	268,599	224,409
Housing Leeds Repairs	179,278	136,580	117,758
Large collections	161	4,981	14,661
LWSS Finance	18,489	25,229	14,763
LWSS Food	6,368	17,515	-
Out of Hours Housing	49,829	43,188	40,146
Out of Hours Internal	5,439	7,781	7,473
Out of Hours Noise	5,212	5,965	4,013
Out of Hours Public	7,634	5,798	5,657
Pest	15,423	17,086	15,828
Planning	26,151	25,335	28,604
Refuse	68,479	44,832	42,493
Registrars	83,916	65,716	67,541
Registrars Priority	8,757	6,777	10,069
Rents	23,697	16,137	7,696
Social Care Emergency	128	99	83
School Admissions	34,259	30,241	35,954
	1,428,472	1,398,906	1,333,762

- During the period from 1st January 2021 to 31st December 2021, the average length of time that customers waited for their call to be answered across all the telephone lines was 10 minutes and the answer rate was 82%. The contact centre is taking a risk-based approach to resource allocation, prioritising lines that may have safeguarding implications or are of a very sensitive nature, for example, people calling the council to register a death. The average speed to answer Child Social Care and Registrars Priority calls was between one

and two minutes, and the answer rate for these lines was 89% and 96% respectively. Summary performance data is shown in table 2.

Table 2: Performance data

Service type	Gross calls	Answer rate	Average answer time (seconds)	Average handling time (seconds)
High priority	99,886	84%	367	910
Medium priority	1,168,234	82%	751	567
Golden number (switchboard)	92,238	80%	209	160
Out of hours	68,114	81%	295	238

4. Customer satisfaction was measured through externally provided software until May 2021 when the contract with the provider of the software expired. In order to deliver a saving in the region of £60k per annum, a decision was taken to develop an in-house customer satisfaction survey. The new customer satisfaction survey was launched on 5th January 2022. As at the 25th January, 11,027 surveys had been issued and 1,392 had been returned from customers, a response rate of 12.62%. The overall customer satisfaction score was 78%.
- 5 Excluding internal recharges to other services, the cost of running the contact centre is £5.4m a year. The staffing budget for the Contact Centre allows for 174fte, however a vacancy factor to reflect turnover of £292k, or approximately 10fte, takes this to 164fte. The contact centre service currently employs 165fte, 126fte of which are direct service operators. 4 people are due to start in the service in February. As the turnover of staff is an average of 2fte per month, the service is therefore approximately at its budgeted establishment.

Vision

- 6 Of course, the Council in all its services is committed to delivering the best possible services within the resources that it has available. The shape and performance of the contact centre are bound up in how the Council envisages customer contact going forward. There are a number of key principles which govern this:
 - To eradicate as many service failures as possible to minimise the need for contact
 - To provide clear public communications to minimise the need for clarification
 - To ensure effective feedback and completion of tasks once actions by the public are raised to minimise repeat contact;
 - To enable those who have access to digital technology to self-serve as a first preference;
 - To widen participation in the use of digital technology;
 - To provide excellent face to face and telephony contact for key services which require complex handling or for customers who are unable to realistically self serve;
- 7 Within this context, the contact centre should act as a source of intelligence and learning for the organisation so that it can be used to deliver improvements to services council-wide. The contact centre will provide the necessary data to service areas to enable them to get things right first time, help drive forward customer-focussed digital solutions and support service areas to ensure the information that customers need is readily and easily available for them. For customers that need to contact us, call wait times will be minimised and we

will endeavour to provide the highest levels of customer service. It is accepted that the current call waiting times need to significantly improve, as does the offer of digital alternatives. The Council cannot achieve a full transformation instantaneously, but concrete actions are being put in place to make a substantial improvement quickly.

- 8 There are three broad areas of focus: contact centre operational performance; digital alternatives; and service redesign.

Contact Centre Operational Performance

Staffing

It is recognised that call waiting times need to be addressed immediately and cannot wait for broader service changes or digital alternatives. Nine members of staff have been recruited through a recent exercise, five of whom have already started, with a further four operational from the beginning of March.

- 9 Using forecasting tools, and factoring in planned service improvements, it has been calculated that 18 more staff are required to meet an answer rate of 90% and average answer times of 2 minutes for the high priority services, golden number calls and out of hours services detailed in table 2, and 5 minutes for our remaining lines. Recruitment is underway and it is anticipated that these service levels will be achieved by June 2022, when these staff are in post and fully operational. We will revisit these standards at this point.
- 10 There is a clear need to improve workforce planning. Staff turnover reduced during 2020/21 but has returned to pre-COVID levels in recent months. One of the aims of the operational action plan is to improve staff engagement and motivation and reduce staff turnover. However, some level of staff turnover is to be expected and a resourcing plan is being developed to ensure that there are sufficient staff numbers to consistently achieve service standards. The resourcing plan will take account of turnover and planned peaks and be flexible enough to handle emergency peaks. The resourcing plan will encompass career pathways within the council that will provide attractive careers for staff progression, a rolling plan of recruitment to manage staff turnover and consideration of a different workforce mix to support effective management of peaks and troughs in demand through various contractual arrangements.
- 11 Resource levels will be assessed on an ongoing basis and only reduced as the benefits of the transformation work are realised.

Training

- 12 The contact centre's CSOs are trained to deal with a range of customer enquiries, and this offers good flexibility in relation to call prioritisation. Call volumes are monitored in real time to manage the call queues in the most effective way with the resource available. There are also processes in place for forecasting demand and managing staff holiday and other leave to ensure resources across the contact centre are optimised. Given the importance of this function for the effective running of the contact centre, a 'standards diagnostic' has been commissioned. This involves a review of the contact centre's resource planning and forecasting practices against a standards framework. The first stage of the review was undertaken in November 2021 and improvement actions have been agreed and are in the

process of being implemented. The next stage of the review will be undertaken in March 2022, where the improvement actions will be validated. A report will then be produced, giving a clear evaluation of areas of strength, potential development and a roadmap for how to progress further in key areas.

- 13 The contact centre has a small team that is dedicated to delivering the training to the CSOs and colleagues in face-to-face services to ensure they are equipped to handle customer queries effectively and provide high levels of customer service. Customer satisfaction feedback is now available through the in-house developed customer survey tool described above. This information will form part of a new suite of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that we are currently developing and used for individual, team and service improvement. The scores from the 1,392 survey respondents in respect of CSO empathy and knowledge are 86% and 84%, which indicates that generally, customers are satisfied with the service they receive from individuals. Our quality assurance processes include undertaking a review of all calls where the customer has indicated that they were not satisfied with the service they have received so that appropriate remedial action is taken and service levels are continually improved.

The Home and Office Working Balance

- 14 Significant operational changes were made in March 2020 to enable the council to respond to the Covid pandemic. Most contact centre staff worked from home during this time to enable services to be delivered safely, efficiently and effectively. The contact centre was better placed than most services in this regard as individual performance is closely monitored and there are mechanisms in place to review and assess the quality of the interactions with customers. Call listening, feedback, supervision and coaching are embedded in the quality assurance processes to promote a culture of continuous improvement within the contact centre. As restrictions were lifted, a return to the workplace plan was developed and followed, with staff returning to the office on a rota basis to ensure all safety rules were followed. We are now working towards a blended mix of working from home and office working, and we will continue to review these arrangements in line with council guidelines to ensure we achieve the optimum balance for the service. This balance will need to consider the advantages of teamwork and development within an office environment against the individual effectiveness of staff working from and any potential impacts on recruitment and retention.

Shifting services online

- 15 The new customer satisfaction survey referred to above asks customers if they had tried to find the information they needed on our website before calling. Of the 1,392 respondents to date, 47% of customers indicated that they had attempted to find the information they needed from the website before calling the contact centre. This suggests there is scope to improve the information available to customers on the website which will, in turn, improve the customer experience and reduce demand in the contact centre. A programme of work is being developed to review the content of the website and provide better digital options for our customers so that optimal numbers of customers find it easy and efficient to use. There is also an ongoing piece of work that aims to improve the communications being issued by the council to customers, making the communications clearer and more accessible for people.

16 Transformation and improvement activities are key to delivering an efficient, accessible and customer focussed contact centre operation. Several opportunities have been identified to achieve savings through transformation work linked to customer contact. These projects focus on tactical digital improvements that will automate processes and enable customers to self-serve at their own convenience.

17 Projects that form part of the transformation work plan include:

Council Tax Landlord Form

18 A new form was launched in October 2021 to replace unstructured email notifications from landlords reporting changes of address for Council Tax in respect of their tenants, which consistently omitted key information and therefore generated more work. The form has had a positive impact on contact centre performance, with 2,100 forms received to date, significantly reducing the backlog of emails and improving response times to customers. The success of this form has also enabled us to plan for staff to move from email administration to work on the council tax telephone line ahead of the peak billing period in March.

Council Tax automation

19 Approximately 15% of calls to the contact centre involve queries about the council tax. The project seeks to automate several council tax processes and provide options for customers to use self-service rather than visit a hub, call, or email the contact centre. This will improve performance and remove the need for as many Customer Service Officers (CSOs) in the contact centre and processing staff in the back-office. It is anticipated that the benefits of this project will be realised in the second half of 2022/23.

SMS Hyperlinks

20 From November people contacting Leeds City Council on mobile phones can choose to receive links to online services by text message. The services that are currently available are: booking an unwanted items collection; reporting a missing, found, stray or dangerous dog; reporting a street lighting fault and requesting information on parking services across the city. This will allow people to avoid waiting to speak to a Customer Services Officer, encourage self-service online and, as a result, reduce wait times for callers unable to complete their request online. The pilot has evidenced that the system works and we are now looking to roll it out for other service areas and higher volume lines.

Missed bins

21 Approximately 68k calls were received on the Refuse line during 2021 and many of these calls were in relation to missed or replacement bins. Work has been undertaken in this area, using a research and design approach, to increase online uptake and improve the experience for customers and staff. The result of the work is a redesigned online form and messages that customers receive to tell them what the council will or will not do to solve the problem, and what the customer can do themselves. The content on the website has also been redesigned to make reporting a missed bin easier, clearer and more transparent. The form redesign has now gone live and work is underway to assess the effectiveness of the changes.

Chatbot Technology

- 22 We are exploring the ways in which Chatbot technology can be used to improve the experience of customers using the website. Chatbots help automate common and repeated customer enquiries and tasks. A proof of concept focused on resolving a common, simple customer request will initially be developed to demonstrate that the use of this technology is feasible. This will then be developed and refined to provide an attractive, alternative contact channel for our customers. The proof of concept will be completed by 31st March 2022.

Referral forms

- 23 Work is in progress to explore how the council may use existing technology to improve end-to-end processes. The contact centre, IDS and colleagues from Adult Social Care are currently working on a proof of concept that would develop a form for professionals to use for referrals, replacing unstructured emails and improving the workflow. The referral form should be in place by the end of the financial year and if the proof of concept is successful, the contact centre would look to use the same technology across other service areas.
- 24 The transformation work will provide a better customer experience for those who are able to access the council's digital services and reduce the level of calls coming into the contact centre, which in turn will lead to improved performance in terms of call waiting times for customers who choose to contact us by telephone. Staff within the contact centre will have more capacity to support those who cannot access the council's digital services and will focus on more complex queries that cannot or should not be automated.

Digital Inclusion

- 25 The contact centre is working with colleagues in the council's Digital Inclusion service to improve the ability for customers to access our services easily and efficiently in the way which best suits their circumstances. The council aims to ensure that more people have equal opportunity to use digital tools, technology and services in the way that is right for them. It is recognised that not all our customers will be able to transact with the council online and so alternative non-digital options will always remain available.
- 26 It is anticipated that by offering better online options for customers, there will be more capacity for the contact centre to handle complex cases which will enhance the user experience for non-digital customers. Whilst the transition to online will be delivered in such a way as to make the process the route of choice for most of our customers, we are committed to ensuring that those who are unable to use that option are provided with relevant support. Digital inclusion is being considered within each piece of transformational work to ensure that all customers have a way of contacting the council.

Service Redesign

- 27 Our vision is to achieve the highest standards of customer satisfaction and minimise call wait times across all services. Key to delivering the excellent service that we want to give our customers is to understand and address the root cause for the contact. Whilst most contact with the call centre is to book services or register changes, the contact centre is also in part a barometer for the problems the public is experiencing with services. Some of the strains on services which have been connected to the pandemic are evident in the calls regarding Registrars, as an example. Whilst, as in this case, not all problems are

avoidable, by improving the links between the contact centre and services, we can better place the Council to react and recover.

- 28 The contact centre holds regular liaison meetings with service areas to discuss performance and agree actions that will improve the customer experience overall. We have recently enhanced this process and formalised a robust performance management and reporting framework to ensure that appropriate feedback and escalation mechanisms are in place to address the root cause of issues and improve the service that the customer receives from start to finish. This includes reviewing end-to-end processes to ensure that customers have a seamless experience when they interact with the council and feeding back to services where transparent and proactive messaging to customers would prevent the need for customers to contact the council. This reporting mechanism will also formally capture where there have been issues with the service provided. Escalation measures will be reviewed and strengthened where necessary to ensure that relevant remedial action is taken to address the root cause of the issues.

What impact will this proposal have?

Wards Affected:
Have ward members been consulted? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

- 29 The work outlined in this report will improve the end-to-end customer experience and ensure that contact centre services are delivered in the most cost-effective way with a clear focus on delivering high quality services for our customers.

What consultation and engagement has taken place?

- 30 Engagement with relevant service areas and colleagues has taken place for each of the workstreams detailed within the report.

What are the resource implications?

- 31 The additional one-off staffing resources required to achieve the performance standards outlined in this report cost £564K. It is proposed that this is funded from the Strategic Contingency reserve. Given the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on service delivery across the Council, this reserve, along with funding unforeseen budget pressures and ensuring the Council becomes more financially resilient, will also be used to fund the recovery of affected services following the pandemic. This includes targeting the backlogs of work which have built up in some services.

What are the legal implications?

- 32 N/A

What are the key risks and how are they being managed?

- 33 The improvement plan is subject to a number of risks. The most immediate improvements are dependent upon the recruitment of new staff to create additional capacity. The current employment market is tight, with some vacancies proving hard to fill. We will mitigate this risk by designing a recruitment strategy which emphasises the opportunities to people who

join the council through the contact centre. The contact centre will work with the jobs and skills service to maximise reach into those seeking work. An open advert for staff will be maintained until all positions are filled. A second risk is the speed at which digital improvements can be delivered. This will be mitigated by the Chief Officer for IDS being part of the improvement board chaired by the Director to ensure work is prioritised. There remains a risk that contact grows due to the level of service enquiries. This risk is being mitigated by recovery plans in a number of services which are subject to high volumes of calls.

Does this proposal support the council's 3 Key Pillars?

Inclusive Growth Health and Wellbeing Climate Emergency

34 The work outlined in this report supports the council's ambition to be an efficient, enterprising and healthy organisation by making better use of resources and exploring the use of modern technology.

35 The work aims to improve the end-to-end customer experience and ensure that contact centre services are delivered in the most cost-effective way with a clear focus on delivering high quality services for our customers.

Options, timescales and measuring success

a) What other options were considered?

36 Consideration has been given to focussing solely on operational improvements pending the technical transformation that would result from exploring holistic contact centre solutions upon the expiry of the existing telephony contract in 2023. This was discounted as it was considered that this would reduce the pace of improvement. It was determined that all opportunities to improve the customer experience and contact centre performance should be evaluated and progressed where business cases identified a benefit.

b) How will success be measured?

37 Progress against the operational action plan will be closely monitored and delivered within defined timescales. Call waiting times, abandoned rates and customer satisfaction will be monitored and will be key indicators of success. Performance will be assessed against the new suite of KPIs that will be introduced.

c) What is the timetable for implementation?

38 The operational activity will be implemented before the end of the financial year and the interim performance standards will be achieved by June 2022.

Appendices

39 N/A

Background papers

40 N/A