

Contact Centre

Date: September 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 update on the 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. The report also provides an overview of work volumes in the contact centre and current performance.

Recommendations

- a) To note the progress that has been made against the actions that were reported to this Board in February 2022.

Why is the proposal being put forward?

- 1 A programme of work aimed at transforming customer contact and improving the customer experience was presented to Scrutiny Board in February 2022. This report provides an update on the progress that has been made for each transformation and improvement activity, customer satisfaction and performance.

Current Performance

- 2 A new customer satisfaction survey was launched on 5th January 2022. Feedback is sought from an automated sample of customers who have telephoned the contact centre with a query or service request. Table 1 provides an overview of the survey questions, the scoring method and performance.

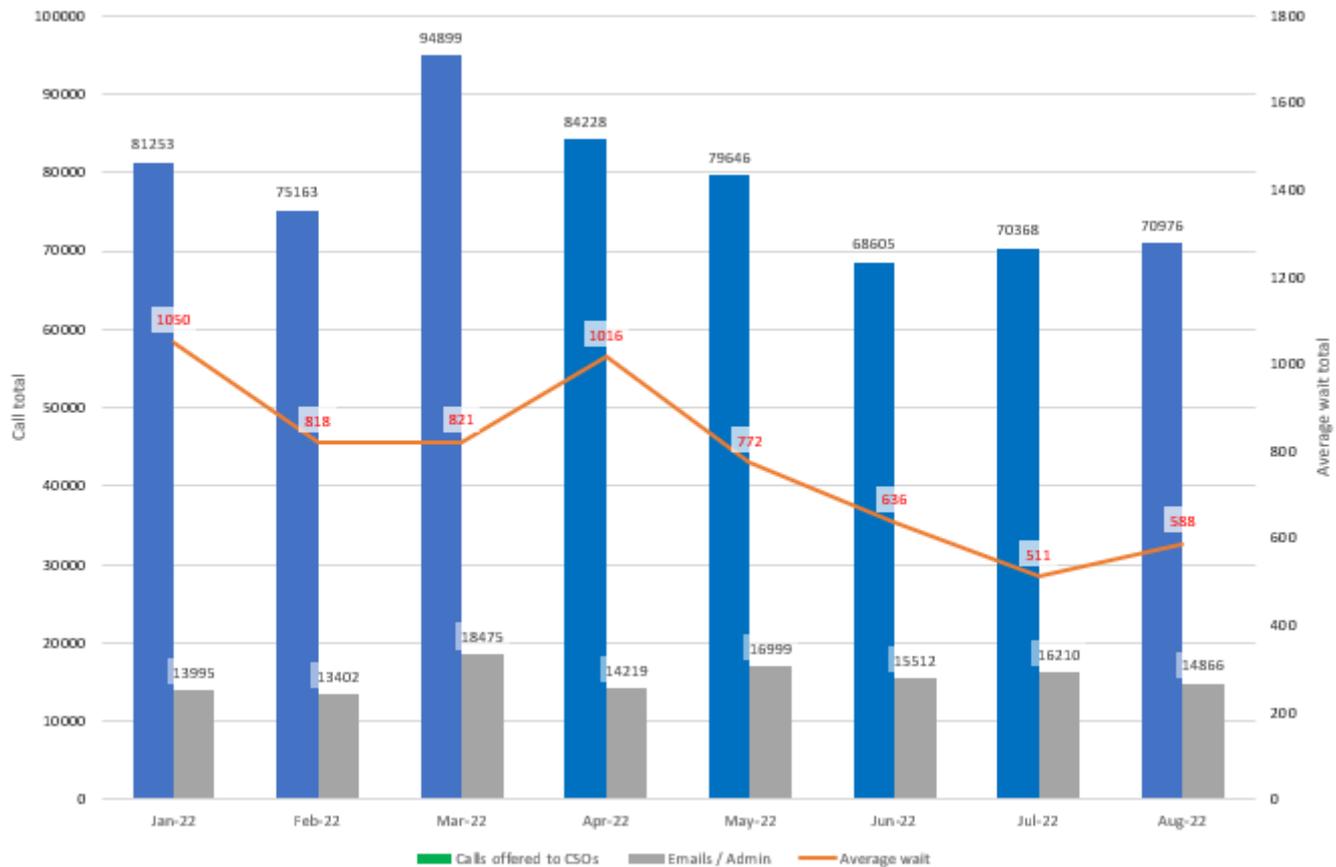
Table 1: Customer Satisfaction

Question	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug
Knowledge: How satisfied were you with the adviser's knowledge when answering your questions and providing guidance? (1 – 5*)	84%	83%	85%	84%	84%	85%	85%	86%
Empathy: How satisfied were you with the adviser's ability to communicate in a positive and caring way? (1 -5)	86%	85%	87%	87%	87%	88%	88%	88%
General Satisfaction: Overall how satisfied are you with the service you received? (1 - 5)	78%	77%	80%	79%	80%	82%	81%	82%
First Contact Resolution: Is it the first time you have contacted us about this query? (Y/N)	75%	75%	78%	78%	76%	77%	77%	79%
Right First Time: Did we resolve your query on the call? (Y/N)	68%	70%	73%	71%	70%	72%	74%	73%
Answer: How satisfied were you with the time taken to answer your call? (1 - 5)	50%	54%	55%	53%	60%	62%	65%	62%
Web: Did you try to find the information you needed on the website before calling (Y/N)	47%	48%	47%	50%	50%	47%	47%	49%
Number of survey responses	1,844	1,853	2,366	1,996	1,647	1,758	2,006	2,002

* measures are shown as a percentage of total possible score from all responses (1 = 0, 2 = 0.25, 3 = 0.5, 4 = 0.75, 5 = 1, Yes = 1, No = 0). All scores are then aggregated.

- 3 The high number of survey responses and the automated sampling gives a good level of confidence that the scores are reflective of the service experienced by customers when they call the contact centre. The scores present a positive picture overall in respect of the knowledge and empathy demonstrated by the Customer Service Officers (CSOs) and indicate that generally, customers are satisfied with the service they receive. The average score for General Satisfaction was 80% from a total of 15,486 survey responses (from 5th January to 31st August). 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.
- 4 The satisfaction survey asks customers if they had tried to find the information they needed on our website before calling, and 48% 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. Work is underway to re-platform due to the SharePoint search functionality being poor. Improvements will also be identified by carrying out further user research to ensure that the customer journey is clear, simple and flows in a way that our customers understand rather than the way that we understand it so they are more likely to find the service/request they need and follow the process from start to finish.
- 5 Satisfaction with the time taken to answer calls has increased from 50% in January to 62% in August. Chart 1 below shows the average waiting time month by month plotted against the volume of calls offered to CSOs.

Chart 1: Volume of calls and average waiting times



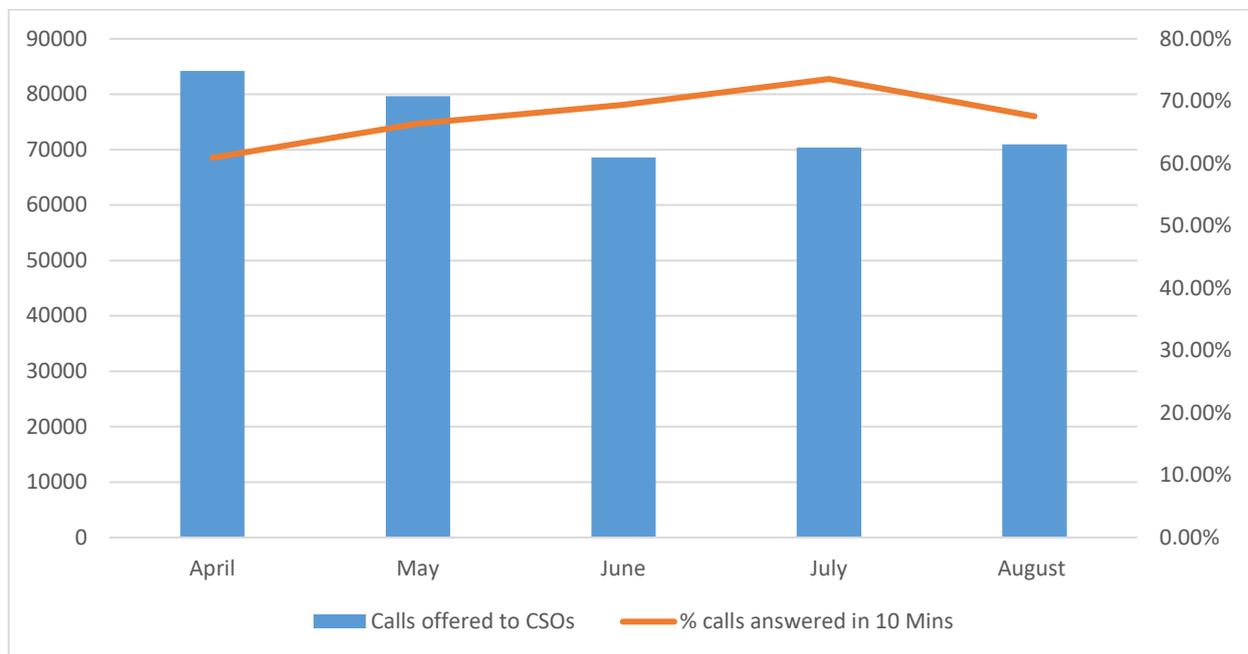
6 Chart 1 shows call volumes, email and admin work, and average speed to answer month by month since January 2022. There have been several key changes in demand for contact centre services this year. Overall, there has been a reduction in transactional contact from customers as digital options have improved, but there has also been an increase in more complex contact, where call handling times are longer. The overall average handling time for all calls for the period January to August 2021 was 540 seconds. For the period January to August 2022, the overall average handling time for calls increased by 13 seconds to 553 seconds. The main reasons for the increased handling time are summarised below:

- Council Tax annual billing generated an expected cyclical spike in contact in March. The peak was intensified and prolonged due to the additional contact that was generated with the announcement of the £150 energy rebate, as customers were calling to enquire when and how they would receive the payment. The combined total of Council Tax calls offered to CSOs in March and April 2022 (58,033) was 84% higher than during the same months in 2021 (31,479). The average length of these calls increased by 10 seconds to 783 seconds when compared to the previous year. E-mail volumes also increased because of this.
- Calls to our Local Welfare Support Scheme (LWSS) lines have increased since the energy price cap rise. For the period January to August, 6,811 more calls have been offered to CSOs in 2022 compared with 2021 (16,868 calls were received in 2021, compared with 23,679 in 2022). The average handling time for these calls is 823

seconds (724 seconds in 2021). Approximately half the calls received through the Welfare Support Services line result in assessments and back-office administration to be undertaken by contact centre staff. This work is included in the email and admin totals shown in chart 1.

- 7 The increase in calls that require longer handling has impacted the speed of progress in reducing call waiting times overall. Another significant factor that has impacted call waiting times is the increased call handling time required for Housing Repairs. The system performance issue has been investigated and a solution is expected to be rolled out in November 2022.
- 8 From April 2022, the contact centre has had access to an enhanced call data set which allows more detailed analysis of telephony activity. Chart 2 shows the percentage of calls answered within 10 minutes.

Chart 2: Percentage of calls answered within 10 minutes



- 9 Charts 1 and 2 show that there has been an improvement since the Council Tax peak in April. In August, the average speed to answer calls was 588 seconds and 67% of calls were answered within 10 minutes.

Operational improvement

Staffing

- 10 It was reported to Scrutiny Board in February that call waiting times needed to be addressed immediately and could not wait for broader service changes or digital alternatives. The contact centre's resourcing plan has focussed on increasing staffing numbers to the level required to reduce call waiting times to preliminary target levels. Key activities have included:
 - launching an open external advertisement and introducing a rolling recruitment and training process.

- o promoting a new recruitment campaign targeted at covering peak contact hours.

- 11 It was reported that the contact centre employed 126fte as direct service operators, that average staff turnover levels are 2fte per month, and that an additional 18fte were required to meet the service levels of 2 minutes for high priority lines and 5 minutes for other lines. As expected, the employment market has been challenging and although the rolling recruitment process has resulted in a regular intake of new staff, the staffing numbers recruited through this route have so far not been sufficient to meet demand. The new recruitment campaign targeted at covering peak hours has resulted in a good level of interest, however, and it is anticipated that staffing numbers will be at the required levels when all new starters are fully trained and operational, and when the recruitment activity that is in progress has been completed. New starters undergo a comprehensive training programme and gain practical experience before becoming fully operational, a process that takes several weeks. Performance levels will continue to improve as the new members of staff that have been appointed become competent in their roles.
- 12 The plans in place will ensure that staffing numbers take account of turnover and planned peaks and resource levels will be assessed on an ongoing basis and only reduced as the benefits of the transformation work are realised. Table 2 summarises the numbers of Customer Service Officers (CSO) who have left and joined the service since January 2022.

Table 2: CSO staffing levels

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug
Starters	2	3.57	3.61		4.01	6.09	4	8.51
Leavers	0.73	0.91		3.81			3.6	3
Total FTE (average for month)	122.76	125.49	131.91	134.11	134.45	140.15	143.97	148.88

- 13 The contact centre is an excellent training ground for staff who want to further their career within the service or in other roles across the council. Of the 13 people that have left the service since January, one person retired and nine have moved to other roles within the council.
- 14 A key element of the operational performance improvement work is to ensure that the contact centre function is managed in line with best practice. The contact centre is a member of an organisation that provides learning, benchmarking, best practice and support services for contact centre functions. The contact centre is working closely with this organisation to refine our planning and forecasting practices and ensure they are in line with best practice. This has included raising awareness of the importance of adhering to strong planning and operational practices through launching a tailored package of learning and development to all relevant staff in September.
- 15 The focus on data and performance information is being strengthened across the service and monitoring is being undertaken to ensure there is a consistent approach across all teams. Call listening, feedback, supervision and coaching are embedded in the quality assurance processes to promote a culture of continuous improvement within the contact centre, and the high levels of customer satisfaction shown in table 1 provide some assurance that these practices are being effectively applied. The performance of the contact centre along with the effectiveness of the digital options available to customers are closely monitored within the service and reported through the Contact Centre Board.

- 16 The contact centre is operating a hybrid model of working that aims to optimise the benefits of working in the office and at home in line with the corporate approach. Regular analysis of performance has identified no significant differences when staff are working from home compared to the office, however we believe that regular interaction in the office environment is beneficial for team building, coaching, induction and training purposes.

Channel Shift

- 17 It was previously reported to the Scrutiny Board that several opportunities have been identified to achieve savings and service improvement 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. 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.
- 18 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 table below shows the positive impact these changes have made, with calls to the contact centre almost halving compared to 2021 and 97% of the online forms now being completed by customers.

Table 3 Refuse Contact (January to July)

	2020	2021	2022
Gross calls	25,722	48,755	27,770
All online forms completed (completed by customers and CSOs)	32,628	50,082	42,772
Forms completed by customers	27,249	45,543	41,618
Percentage self-serve	84%	91%	97%

- 19 The reduction in calls to the contact centre has enabled more resource to be assigned to handle the increased demand outlined in paragraph 6 above.

Council Tax Automation

- 20 Approximately 15% of calls to the contact centre involve queries about the council tax. The project will 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, which will result in increased customer access to council tax services and improved customer satisfaction. The contract was awarded in July to an established IT partner who works with other authorities automating revenues and benefits services. The project is on target and the new automation software is expected to be implemented in October 2022. Based on similar work being undertaken in other councils, it is anticipated that call volumes received by the contact centre will reduce by approximately 10,500 per year which is equivalent to the work of 5 FTEs. This, in turn, will improve the call waiting time for those customers who choose to contact us by telephone.

Online Forms

- 21 Work is in progress to explore how the council may use existing technology to improve end-to-end processes. In November 2021, an online form for a third-party change of address was launched. The form facilitated the collection of all data required from a landlord who needed to provide us with change of address details. Previously, this instruction was received as an email, which often did not include all the information required to complete the change of address, resulting in multiple emails being exchanged. The form captures all the required information first time and resulted in a reduction of emails being received. From November 2021 to 6 Sept 2022, we have received 13,996 completed forms.
- 22 It was previously reported to Scrutiny Board that the contact centre, IDS and colleagues from Adult Social Care were working on a proof of concept that would develop a form for professionals to use for referrals, replacing unstructured emails and improving the workflow. At that time, it was anticipated that the referral form would be in place by 1st April 2022, however due to resourcing pressures and competing priority projects this deadline was not met. An IT partner has now been procured to develop the form and train IDS resources to enable the development of other forms in-house in the future. Work with the IT partner started on 5th September and will conclude in December 2022
- 23 Approximately 48,000 calls relating to Registrars have been offered to CSOs during the period January to August 2022. A large proportion of these calls are queries from customers about appointments and certificates. The contact centre has been working with an external partner, the Registrars service and IDS to implement a series of forms that provide online booking solutions to enable customers to self-serve. The project has been successful and 12 out of 15 forms are now live. The last form went live in the middle of August and significant benefits are already being realised within the first few weeks of launching:
- 230 online ceremony bookings since 03.08.22
 - 131 online bookings for notice of marriage since 18.08.22
 - 499 births registered online in August 2022
- 24 The above has been achieved without any promotion of the forms, which we plan to arrange via our social media channels. Registrars and CSOs will also be asked to promote the use of the forms which will increase take up. The final three forms (reporting a death and two citizenship forms) are planned to be live before the end of September.
- 25 The table below shows the performance in August and the previous three months for comparison purposes. The improvement in the average answer time in August is partly due to reallocation of resources and partly due to the new forms making the process more streamlined for CSOs, reducing the call handling time.

Table 4 Registrars

	Calls offered to CSOs	Average Answer Time	Average Handling Time	% Answered (CSO & IVR)
May	3,816	662	757	83%
June	3,557	630	677	86%
July	2,997	625	615	89%
August	3,417	315	562	92%

Chatbot Technology

- 26 It was reported to Scrutiny Board in February 2022 that 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. It was reported that a proof of concept focused on resolving a common, simple customer request would be completed by 31st March 2022. This target has been achieved and work is now focussed on developing and refining the beta version of the Chatbot to provide an attractive, alternative contact channel for our customers and to allow handoff from chatbot to voice.

Improving Council Services

- 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 contact centre is to resolve queries, book services or register changes, the contact centre is also in part a barometer for the problems the public is experiencing. Presently, the most acute issue presenting to the contact centre is the sharp increase in call volumes and demand for support requested due to the ongoing cost of living crisis, as discussed above. We are working with the Financial Inclusion and Welfare Support teams to ensure that appropriate resources are in place to provide the necessary support for our citizens. As an immediate action, we have trained 8 additional CSOs to handle the increased LWSS contact and support citizens who contact us through this line. We are also working with IDS to analyse the contact and identify any opportunities to improve the online options available to citizens who are seeking support. The link to support can be found here [#TogetherLeeds Cost of Living Campaign](#)
- 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.
- 29 The contact centre is working with the council's Communications and Marketing Team on the corporate approach to mass communications issued by the council to customers, to make communications clearer and more accessible for people. An anticipated outcome from the work will be a reduction in avoidable contact coming into the contact centre which in turn will reduce call waiting times. A separate report focussed on mass communication and engagement will be presented to Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board in December 2022.

Future Changes

- 30 The technical developments outlined above focus on tactical digital solutions that will improve the customer experience in defined areas. A longer-term view is also being taken as work is underway to fundamentally transform how customers interact and transact with the council online. Contact centre and IDS colleagues are exploring holistic solutions that will address common customer contact issues and improve the customer experience overall. It is anticipated that the solution will enable customers to log into a portal, access their communications with the council, and complete and view the status of service requests. As well as improving the self-service offer to customers and reducing calls coming into the contact centre, this technical advancement would also improve the customer experience when they contact the council by telephone. The technology will surface the relevant customer information more comprehensively and efficiently to the CSO, resulting in more streamlined and effective call handling. A business case and timeline is currently being developed to progress this piece of work.

What impact will this proposal have?

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

- 31 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?

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

What are the resource implications?

- 33 The resources required for each of the projects and workstreams referenced in this report are captured within the relevant business cases.
- 34 The contact centre is currently working with the Financial Inclusion and Welfare teams to secure the funding required to meet the rise in demand for Local Welfare Support Services.

What are the legal implications?

- 35 N/A

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

- 36 The improvement plan is subject to a number of risks. There remains a risk that the challenging recruitment market reduces the speed at which we can onboard and train new starters, and resources are insufficient to meet demand. There is also a risk that contact

grows due to increased service enquiries or as new government initiatives (such as the £150 rebate) are rolled out. These risks are being managed through delivering the recruitment plan outlined in this report and by the recovery plans in place in a number of services which are subject to high volumes of calls.

- 37 Another key 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.

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

Inclusive Growth Health and Wellbeing Climate Emergency

- 38 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.

- 39 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?

- 40 The Contact Centre Board considers all significant opportunities that are identified to improve the customer experience and the performance of the contact centre. The activity outlined in this report represents the opportunities that have been agreed through the Contact Centre Board.

b) How will success be measured?

- 41 Progress against the operational action plan is being closely monitored within the service and through the Contact Centre Board. Call waiting times, abandoned rates and customer satisfaction will be monitored and will be key indicators of success.

c) What is the timetable for implementation?

- 42 The timescale for each transformation activity is included within the relevant section of this report.

Appendices

- 43 N/A

Background papers

- 44 N/A