

Contact Centre Update

Date: 11 December 2023

Report of: Director of Strategy and 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

Brief summary

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 our Best City Ambition.

The report also provides an overview of work volumes in the contact centre and current performance.

The report follows previous Board interest in the contact centre in the 2021/22 and 2022/23 municipal years.

Recommendations

The Board is asked to:

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

What is this report about?

1. A programme of work aimed at transforming customer contact and improving the customer experience was initially presented to Scrutiny Board in February 2022 with a further update in September 2022. This report provides a brief description about the background to the service (particularly given that there are new members on the Scrutiny Board), an update on the progress that has been made since the last report in relation to customer satisfaction, performance and transformation activity. It draws on benchmarking where relevant and includes reference to workforce and budget information, the staff satisfaction results for the service and service development activity that has helped to deliver performance improvements.
2. The contact centre deals with approximately 1 million calls and 150,000 emails per year, supporting 23 service areas across the organisation in five broad areas;
 - Council Tax and Benefits (including local welfare support)
 - Care and Safeguarding (including adults and children's social care)
 - Housing and Planning (including Choice Based Lettings and anti-social behaviour)
 - Transactional Services (including registrars, school admissions, highways, refuse, pest control, elections, blue badge)
 - Out of Hours (a 5pm – 11pm provision for emergency / crisis, including emergency housing repairs and highways issues)
3. The service employs 190 FTE, 140 of which are Customer Services Officers who are supported by a management team and three key support teams –
 - Resource Planning team (responsible for scheduling, forecasting and planning of the service)
 - Performance and Relationship team (responsible for reporting and liaison with service areas in relation to service updates and process changes)
 - Training team (responsible for new starter and multi skilling training)
4. These three support teams also provide support to the Face-to-Face operations (community hubs, libraries and One Stops) in the Communities and Environments directorate.
5. The contact centre is responsible for responding to messages from the council's social media platforms and monitoring activity across these channels – the social media team handle about 60,000 incoming direct social media messages a year (around 4,500 – 5,000 messages a month).
6. The contact centre is currently undergoing a period of transformation, starting with the introduction of new telephony systems to be delivered in April 2024. The council has developed six strategic aims in relation to contact centre transformation –
 - To eradicate as many service failures as possible to minimise the need for customer 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. The development of a customer contact board under a single strategic lead, working in partnership with IDS on prioritisation of digital developments, will be key in achieving these aims.

Current Performance

8. Customer Satisfaction

9. A new customer satisfaction survey was launched in January 2022 and continues to be used to monitor customer satisfaction levels. The feedback is sought from an automated sample of customers who have telephoned the contact centre with a query or service request. Table 1 below provides an update of customer satisfaction levels from January to October 2023.

Table 1: Customer Satisfaction January to October 2023

Question	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct
	% Satisfaction									
Knowledge: How satisfied were you with the adviser's knowledge when answering your questions and providing guidance?	88	87	88	87	86	86	86	86	86	84
Empathy: How satisfied were you with the adviser's ability to communicate in a positive and caring way?	89	89	90	89	88	88	88	88	88	87
General Satisfaction: Overall how satisfied are you with the service you received?	84	84	85	84	84	83	84	84	84	82
First Contact Resolution: Is it the first time you have contacted us about this query? (Y/N)	80	79	81	81	80	79	78	77	79	76
Right First Time: Did we resolve your query on the call? (Y/N)	74	75	74	74	72	73	75	74	74	74
Answer time: How satisfied were you with the time taken to answer your call? (1 - 5)	66	71	64	63	66	68	72	75	76	74
Web: Did you try to find the information you needed on the website before calling (Y/N)	44	44	45	43	43	43	43	45	42	43
Based on an average call wait time (mins)	13	10	17	20	18	11	7	6	5	7

10. The percentage scores outlined in the table above present a positive picture overall in respect of the knowledge and empathy demonstrated by the Customer Service Officers (CSOs) and indicate that most customers are satisfied with the service they receive from the contact centre. The average score for general satisfaction was 84%, which is an improvement of 4% compared to the same period in 2022.

11. Customer satisfaction benchmarking with other local authorities indicates that Leeds is performing well in this area – comparable benchmarking is difficult due to the varied operational nature of each contact centre (i.e. size, demand and services provided by each

contact centre), but given Leeds is larger and handling higher call volumes, the satisfaction rates being achieved are encouraging.

Local authority	Overall customer satisfaction
Leeds	84%
Barnsley	82%
Liverpool	75%
York	82%

12. For quality assurance purposes, a review of all calls where the customer has indicated that they were not satisfied with the service they have received is undertaken to ensure any appropriate remedial action is taken and service levels are continually improved.
13. The satisfaction survey asks customers if they had tried to find the information they needed on our website before calling. On average, 44% of customers indicated they had attempted to find the information they needed on the Council's website before calling the contact centre. This is a decrease from 48% during the same period in 2022, which 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. There is more information on the ongoing channel shift work outlined later in this report.
14. Satisfaction levels for first contact resolution have increased from 77% in 2022 to 79% in 2023, along with an increase in right first time from 72% to 74%. The satisfaction data shows that improved answer times have little impact on overall satisfaction scores, although there has been an 8% increase in satisfaction in relation to time taken to answer the call in the period.
15. Appended to this report are extracts from the September and October staff newsletters which highlights a sample of compliments and feedback received about colleagues and the service they have provided.

16. Call Handling Performance

Chart 1 below shows call and email volumes alongside the average speed to answer calls per month for January to October 2023, and **chart 2** provides a comparison of this data with the same period in 2022.

Chart 1 - Volume of calls, emails and average wait times Jan - Oct 2023

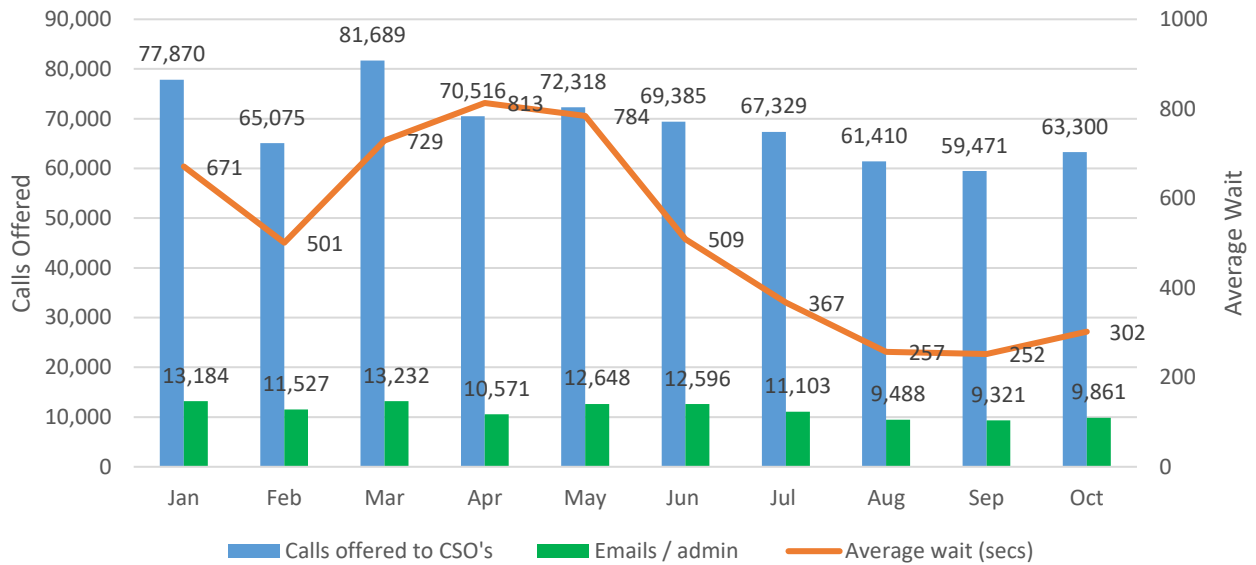
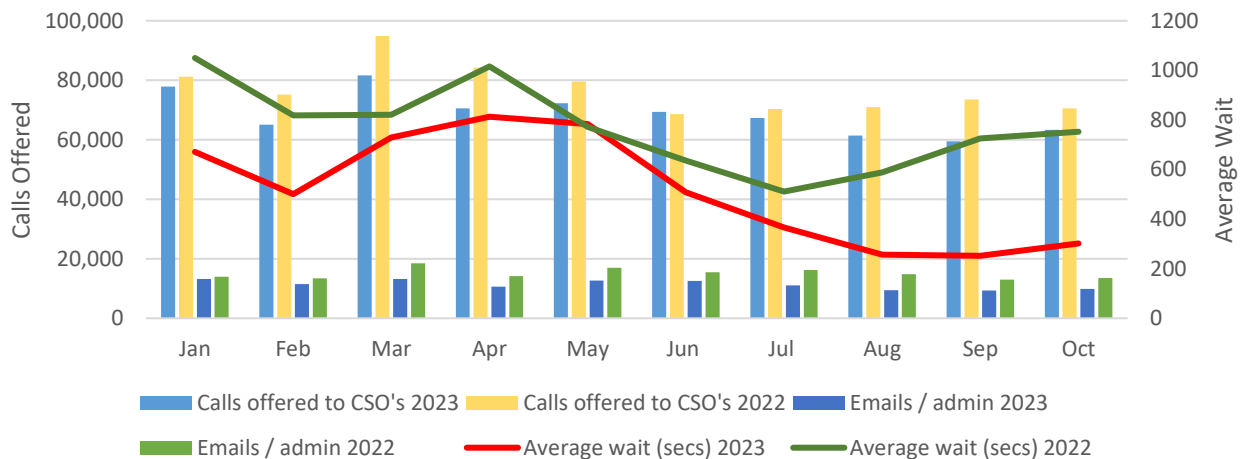


Chart 2 - Comparison of volume of calls, emails and average waiting times for Jan – Oct 2023 and 2022



- 17 Overall, there has been a reduction in transactional contact from customers as some digital options have improved over the last 12 months, particularly in registrars and council tax. The trend for 2023 in terms of level of contact mirrors that for the same period in 2022, with the expected cyclical spikes in contact for council tax annual billing, school admissions and elections.
- 18 The average speed to answer calls within the contact centre has reduced by more than 50% in recent months – in October 2022 the average wait time was 12 minutes, compared to five minutes in 2023. This has been achieved due to several factors which include reduction in demand, increased focus on performance management and reduction of operations on some transactional lines where evidence suggests this has minimal impact.
- 19 From January 2023, the contact centre experienced an unprecedented demand on the Local Welfare Service as a direct consequence of the cost of living crisis. The table below

illustrates a performance comparison on this line from 2022 to 2023, which shows an increase in demand of over 200%.

2022				2023		
	Gross Calls	Answer rate	ASA	Gross Calls	Answer rate	ASA
January	2,713	80%	602 secs	7,906 (+191%)	62%	1,372 secs
February	2,229	84%	385 secs	6,232 (+179%)	57%	1,390 secs
March	2,910	82%	450 secs	8,880 (+205%)	47%	2,772 secs
April	2,854	77%	671 secs *	9,204 (+222%)	45%	3,826 secs
May	2,770	76%	724 secs *	10,657 (+284%)	46%	3,755 secs

ASA = Average speed to answer

* Average speed to answer impacted by the demand caused by the council tax rebate in 2022.

- 20 From May 2023, a triage service was introduced on the welfare line to improve answer times. Customer Service Officers carried out some qualification checks to see whether a customer would qualify for an award before passing them through to an assessor to complete their application. This improved the speed to answer on the line, which decreased to 522 seconds from June, 368 seconds in July and 63 seconds in August.
- 21 A freephone number was also introduced on to the welfare line from May 2023 to help residents with the cost of contact, particularly as at that time the wait times were excessive.
- 22 From late June 2023, the welfare scheme more broadly reverted to a 'crisis only' scheme due to budget constraints. This also resulted in a reduced demand for the contact centre as residents became aware they would no longer fit the award criteria for the scheme. The triage service was removed in September once performance was back within target levels. Customer satisfaction on the welfare service has decreased since the restriction of the scheme, from 89% in May to 47% in September.
- 23 Whilst the contact Centre respond to calls and undertake checks and assessments on the welfare line, the welfare service sits within the Communities, Housing and Environment Directorate and is dealt with by the Environment, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Board.
- 24 **Reduced opening on transactional lines**
- 25 Due to the current in year financial challenge and budget constraints, recruitment has been slower due to the new vacancy controls. To maintain acceptable wait times across the service, opening hours on some transactional lines have been reduced to use existing resources more widely across the service. This approach was agreed following consultation with service leads after discussions in a Forum Network event where other local authorities shared that they had taken this approach with success and without complaint.
- 26 The lines that have reduced opening hours are transactional and have good online content. The lines are still open for a period every day for customers who need to speak with someone. There have been no complaints received from any customer about the new opening times of the lines. Service area leads have not reported any issues since the opening hours were reduced. This change has allowed us to maintain average speed of answer and reduce levels of administrative back logs (emails, applications) without recruiting to all vacant positions.

27 The reduced opening on lines will be reviewed in March 2024. The lines that are currently on reduced opening hours are large collections, pest control and blue badge.

28 Local Authority Benchmarking

29 The contact centre conducts regular benchmarking to other local authority contact centres. Comparable benchmarking is difficult due to the varied operational nature of each contact centre (i.e. size, demand and services provided by each contact centre). Liverpool council is of a similar size to Leeds and provides a comparable range of contact centre services.

Benchmarking April 2023 - September 2023		
	Liverpool	Leeds
Calls offered	346,770	464,029
% calls answered	77%	88%
Average speed of answer	627	466
Customer satisfaction	75%	84%
Complaints	48	87
Emails	18,343	75,588
CSO's	88.2	127.34

30 The data shows that Leeds is being offered a higher volume of calls and has a higher % of calls answered, alongside a faster average speed of answer and greater customer satisfaction, although Leeds does have larger staffing levels.

31 Leeds receives four times the volume of emails that Liverpool receives, which is an indication that we still have work to do in relation to channel shift. Further meetings are scheduled with Liverpool to understand how email channels have been reduced / diverted.

32 Workforce

33 Staffing levels within the contact centre have reduced in the last 12 months. Turnover within the services continues to be positive, in that staff tend to move on to higher graded roles within the authority. The contact centre has been impacted by the current recruitment controls which means that recruitment is generally taking longer. Whilst performance is improved in comparison to this period last year, we anticipate that the move into winter months coupled with the recruitment lag is likely to impact performance into quarter four.

34 It was reported to scrutiny board in September 2022 that increasing staffing levels would be key to improving call answer times ahead of any digital change which would take time to implement. Targeted recruitment campaigns were undertaken to recruit to specific shift patterns to support peak periods. Targeting shift patterns in this way has ensured that subsequent leavers have had less of an impact on the service. The contact centre is currently operating with 127.34 CSOs, which is the lowest staffing levels have been in two years. Whilst performance is currently improved from 2022, the regular turnover of leavers means that ongoing recruitment within the service is essential to maintain performance standards.

35 Approval has been given to recruit ten customer service officers over a two month period. Start dates for each group will be 15 January and 19 February, we expect that following training these staff will be effective in the telephone role from 12 February and 18 March

respectively. A decline in performance is anticipated as we expect we will have further leavers between November and March when the new starters will have completed training.

36 Staffing and sickness

37 Current staffing levels show that there are 15 FTE fewer Customer Services Officers in the Contact Centre compared to this time last year, yet performance levels have continued to improve.

38 Sickness levels have increased by just over 2% compared to the same period last month and there has been a small but steady increase in absence over the last 4 months. There are a number of long term sickness cases and Contact Centre management are working closely with colleagues in HR to expedite a return to work where possible.

39 Information on the council's wellbeing offer is regularly communicated through the Contact Centre communication channels along with opportunities to focus on training, development and wellbeing during the weekly People Hour.

40 Re-fresher training for managers on the Improving Attendance Policy and wellbeing offer is also being planned with a view to rolling this out in the new year.

41 Staffing and sickness – 2022 / 2023

	Q1			Q2			Q3			Q4		
	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Staffing and wellbeing												
FTE (CSO)	134.3	134.64	140.34	144.16	149.07	142.4	142.4	145.35	139.16	137.55	137.55	138.04
Number of new starters (CSO)	0	4.04	6.1	4	8.51	0	5.8	2.87	0	0	0	0
Number of leavers (CSO)	3.81	0	3	1	7.608	4	4.22	2	2	1.81	0	0
Sickness %	7.89%	8.06%	7.62%	9.45%	7.95%	6.67%	5.86%	8.17%	6.83%	7.71%	7.54%	7.89%

42 Staffing and sickness - 2023/2024 to date

	Apr	Q1 May	Jun	Jul	Q2 Aug	Sept	Oct	Q3 Nov	Dec
Staffing and wellbeing									
FTE (CSO)	137.27	136.66	132.39	130.14	129.21	134.27	127.34		
Number of new starters (CSO)	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	3.00	4.00		
Number of leavers (CSO)	0.00	2.00	4.00	0.00	5.00	5.00	5.00		
Sickness %	6.13%	5.01%	4.83%	6.42%	6.61%	7.44%	8.05%		

43 Staff development

44 From May 2023, a group of Customer Service Support Officers began a 14-week personal development programme. The Customer Service Support Officers are responsible for delivering a helpdesk function (providing guidance on escalated calls) and delivering call coaching activity across the service.

45 The 14-week programme delivered skill based modules in areas such as coaching, communication, style awareness, motivation, delegation and negotiation in order to improve knowledge and experience amongst this cohort of staff. The course ended with an end of course presentation from each delegate. The learning is designed to help support

successions planning for the contact centre by investing into the next generation of leaders within the service.

46 It was previously reported to Scrutiny Board that 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 has been working closely with this organisation to refine our planning and forecasting practices and ensure they are in line with best practice. In May 2023, our Resource Planning team completed a programme of learning and were awarded a Full Standards Benchmarking Accreditation which is valid for two years. This is a fantastic achievement for the team and demonstrates the progress they have made with the application of their learning in relation to planning, forecasting, scheduling and optimising contact centre performance.

47 Staff survey results

48 The staff survey was completed in the first quarter of 23/24 and the contact centre had a 79% response rate, with 170 out of 216 staff taking part. The high level of staff engagement with the survey is very encouraging.

49 The overall results from the contact centre are very good, generally scoring higher than the council and directorate average scores across most indicators. Key highlights from the results are –

Indicator	Contact Centre	Directorate	Council
I know what is expected of me	96%	91%	91%
I'm kept in the loop	78%	72%	70%
I get a thank you for a job well done	72%	69%	69%
I'm treated fairly at work	85%	79%	78%
I get help and support from colleagues	91%	86%	86%
I am well supported with health, safety and wellbeing	85%	77%	76%
I am well prepared / supported through change	76%	63%	61%
I am able to speak up about any concerns	83%	77%	76%
I enjoy my job	75%	78%	78%
I have good quality appraisals	81%	70%	68%
I am well supervised / line managed	91%	79%	77%
My workload is manageable	80%	68%	62%
Our team meetings work well	80%	65%	65%
My team supports equality / preventing discrimination	92%	87%	87%

50 The high scores reflect the excellent work that has been delivered in the service in the last 12 months to improve communication, morale and motivation in the service. This has included embedding a monthly newsletter, a recognition scheme, regular performance updates, issuing all staff with a personal development plan with a focus on equality, diversity and inclusion and delivering wellbeing activities in team meetings.

51 Areas where the contact centre has scored lower in the results include 'I have good quality tools, IT equipment and systems' (61%) and 'there are opportunities to progress my career' (54%).

52 The staff survey results have been shared with staff, and an action plan has been developed with a view to improving the lower scoring areas. Interventions to address the lowest scoring areas have already commenced with the development programme outlined

above and the procurement of a new telephony solution, which is covered later in this report. The overall results indicate good levels of staff satisfaction across the team which is encouraging given the pressure on performance in the team at the time the survey was conducted.

53 Transformation and channel shift

- 54 Council tax automation – it was reported at the last update to Scrutiny Board in September 2022 that this project would 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.
- 55 The first council tax forms were made live in December 2022 and this has resulted in a slight reduction in contact. There are a further three forms still to be made live which we anticipate will reduce contact further.

Council Tax call volumes												
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
2022	20,152	19,146	36,755*	36,968*	36,618*	23,509*	23,649*	19,882	18,764	19,926	18,097	12,855
2023	19,886	15,587	24,422	21,148	19,052	16,990	15,777	15,611	14,729	17,122		

*Figures are inflated due to the £150 council tax rebate payment error.

- 56 Adult Social Care referral form - 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.
- 57 The form had a 'soft launch' in June 2023, being released to a small group of professional to complete their referrals. Since the form was launched, it has had a completion rate of 62% (form views converted to submissions). Discussions are now underway to roll out the form more widely.
- 58 Chatbot – it was reported at the last board that a proof of concept chat bot would be developed that would focus on resolving a common, simple customer requests. The bot has been developed and deployed across several service pages on leeds.gov.uk. The take up on the chatbot has been lower than anticipated and the contact centre has not realised any benefits in relation to demand reduction. This work has been paused pending a further prioritisation of contact centre transformation work.
- 59 Telephony – since the last update at Scrutiny Board procurement has taken place to implement a new telephony system for the Contact Centre as the contract for the current system expires at the end of March 2024. Work is progressing well with the implementation partner with broad engagement across the Contact Centre on the design phase. The user testing phase will take place in the new year with planned implementation of the new system by April 2024.
- 60 Phase one of the telephony will introduce 'like for like' switch out of functionality from the existing Avaya system to the new Genesys system. Improvements that will be delivered in phase one for the customer includes simplified auto attendants, accurately calculated call wait times, call-back facility (whilst holding place in queue), queue position and hold music.
- 61 Customer Services Officers will benefit from having one interface for all telephony activity, including receiving / making calls, improved call transfer, improved access to resources and schedules and outbound dialling technology.

62 The timescales for implementation are ambitious but positive engagement between the contact centre, IDS and implementation partners is enabling the project to be currently on track. Contingency plans are being implemented should progress slow at any point, and the risk in relation to delivering telephony is being monitored via the corporate risk register.

What impact will this proposal have?

63 The work outlined in this report supports our transformation agenda and channel shift strategy by offering digital and self-service options. The intention is to significantly 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.

How does this proposal impact the three pillars of the Best City Ambition?

Health and Wellbeing Inclusive Growth Zero Carbon

64 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.

65 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.

What consultation and engagement has taken place?

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

66 Engagement with relevant service areas and colleagues continues to take for each of the workstreams detailed within the report.

What are the resource implications?

67 The resources required for each of the projects and workstreams referenced in this report are captured within the relevant operational budgets and business cases.

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

68 The improvement plan is subject to a number of risks. There remains a risk that the challenging budget position and associated spending controls reduces the speed at which we can recruit and train new starters, as turnover in the service remains consistent. There is also a risk that contact grows due to increased service enquiries or as new government initiatives are rolled out. These risks are being managed through early escalation via contact centre board and a review of services that can be reduced / stopped in line with available resources for effective delivery.

69 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.

What are the legal implications?

Options, timescales and measuring success

What other options were considered?

- 71 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.

How will success be measured?

- 72 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

What is the timetable and who will be responsible for implementation?

- 73 The transformation activity across the Contact Centre is ongoing. A broader review of approach to the customer is about to commence as part of the organisation design work to support the financial challenge work.

Appendices

- Customer compliments extracts from staff newsletter – September and October 2023.

Background papers

- None