

Executive

Customer Access by Phone

12 April 2010

Report of Head of Customer Service and Information Services

PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report seeks approval for a new approach to using our contact centre and switchboard telephone systems to improve their resilience, make it quicker for customers to get the information they need, and improve the quality of information available to the Council about how calls are handled.

This report is Public

Recommendations

The Executive is recommended:

- (1) To approve the use of a short menu of options on some of the main customer contact numbers as illustrated at appendix 1.
- (2) To approve the use of recorded information on those lines where customer research has shown it to be helpful to the customer.
- (3) To note the improvement to telephony response and business continuity for customer contact brought about by these changes.
- (4) To approve development of a publicity campaign to help customers get the best number for their service requirements.
- (5) To approve the use of mystery shopping to measure the completeness of service delivered at first contact by phone.

Executive Summary

Introduction

- 1.1 The delivery of telephony services changed when a central Customer Service team was formed to provide a focus for all customer contact. As well as the main switchboard, the Council procured and deployed a contact centre. The two systems are quite different: a switchboard is for passing calls on as quickly as possible; a contact centre is designed to place calls with people who can deal with the enquiry. Calls passed from the contact centre cannot be passed back and tie up a line until handed off or hung up.

- 1.2 A large proportion of Council services now have their customer facing aspects delivered by customer service, and the remainder will be scheduled to transfer in the near future. It is necessary now to review the range of numbers we publish, the role of the switchboard, and the opportunities offered by our investment in the contact centre system to satisfy growing customer demand within existing resources.
- 1.3 This report offers proposals and ways of working that balance the need for excellent customer service against limited time and staff resource. It is also intended to improve the speed of answering general enquiries.

Proposals

- 1.4 First, we are proposing the transfer of our main switchboard number into the contact centre, as a “general enquiries” number. We have analysed the reasons for customers using this number and with the appropriate use of a menu to allow callers to select the service they want they can get more quickly to someone who can help them.
- 1.5 We are therefore also proposing the permanent introduction of a limited menu system within the contact centre, to allow us both to provide pertinent information relating to the subject on which the person is calling and to improve the speed with which the caller is speaking to someone best placed to help on that subject.
- 1.6 We are also proposing a standard approach to the use of voicemail which will allow us to publish that approach and manage customers’ expectations.
- 1.7 Finally, we are proposing to supplement the measurement of the speed of answer – which can be taken to mean the speed with which a recorded message kicks in telling you all the lines are busy – to measuring the completeness of the response to dialling a particular number; i.e. did the customer get the information they needed at the first contact. An annual programme of mystery shopping is proposed as the means of measurement.

Conclusion

- 1.8 Significant changes have been made over the past two years to how the Council manages its customer contact, with much progress towards a transparent, equitable, consistent and organisationally-efficient approach.
- 1.9 The centrality of the telephone to the delivery of all the Council’s services means it is of paramount importance that people who use the phone get the best possible service from the contact centre advisers, and the need to be responsive in terms of getting information to customers in the case of unexpected events and emergencies.

Background Information

The telephony service

- 2.1 People who ring the switchboard number of 252535 are passed on from the switchboard by a maximum of two advisers working as switchboard operators. These calls go into the contact centre, into other services and to individual officers. Over the past two years, these two systems have worked alongside each other. Services for which the application, request, payment or booking responsibility has been transferred to Customer Service and have published numbers which take callers direct to the contact centre team of many more advisers where their enquiry is handled.

Current issues

- 2.2 Specific events, sometimes unpredictable, cause many calls on the same subject eg gritting, bin collections after an interruption etc. and block up the contact centre and switchboard.
- 2.3 The need to maximise the value of the contact centre to our customers. We can end up with all advisers spending all their time giving the same info to all customers who ring on something seasonal, and so being unavailable to deal speedily with customers calling with service needs.
- 2.4 The limitations of the switchboard in dealing with 252535 calls frequently cannot cope with the sheer number of incoming calls which means that it creates a bottleneck where some calls are lost or an unacceptable time is taken to answer.
- 2.5 Customer calls to a switchboard rather than to a service adviser count as calls of “no value” in the context of National Indicator 14 (avoidable contact): the example of “no value” contact the Audit Commission gives in its training is when the customer doesn’t know the right number to call. Better publicity of fewer numbers would help more people call the right number first time.
- 2.6 The switchboard itself becomes unsupported in 2015.

Where we need to be

- 2.7 Customers getting good information or help as quickly as possible and in as few steps as possible.
- 2.8 Taking low value calls out of the system to free up scarce resource for customers with real need.
- 2.9 Clear, sensible and achievable service promise in respect of our phone contact including our voicemail use.

How we get there: the proposals in detail

- 2.10 Divert 252535 off the switchboard operator console and into the contact centre, joining with the “General Enquiries” line.
- 2.11 Publish over time a limited suite of numbers to customers - 227000 – 227009

with each number allocated to a published service area. It will take two or three years to move away from the existing published numbers during which time calls on those numbers will be pointed at the new number – invisible to the customer. All ten numbers will not be in use straight away – see Appendix 1.

- 2.12 Continue using Direct Dial numbers into service teams or individuals, published on letters or given out to customers where there is ongoing service delivery.
- 2.13 Use the function of the contact centre system to actively filter calls by subject type (press one, press two, to a maximum of three, where it adds value on a service line, except general enquiries which has four levels) within the published service areas.
- 2.14 Present the four menu options on the general enquiries line in order of customer demand, and to regularly change the fourth option in response to seasonality and topicality, so the services with highest demand are always in the selection, in demand order.
- 2.15 Promote heavily the small suite of numbers for public use and allow 252535 to fall out of use ahead of switchboard itself falling out of use (becoming unsupported) in 2015. This includes removing it from letterheads, telephone directory services etc.
- 2.16 Put in place a published voicemail policy for the whole council, recognising that moving away from an “operator” function means calls passed out of the contact centre cannot be passed back; they have to be handled at the number to which they have been transferred or they remain occupying a customer service line. The basis for the use of voicemail will be;
 - voicemail during public service hours will be the exception rather than the rule through the use of phone diverts to others in the office and mobiles
 - when activated, there will be clear and consistent customer information regarding officer availability and response times
 - the norm will be same day response but there will be a maximum of a two day response

The benefits of this proposal

- 2.17 Moving 252535 off the switchboard will allow all trained customer service advisers to answer calls fully at first contact whenever possible.
- 2.18 Using recorded information where we know what customers are calling in response to something we've sent them, and know the questions they are going to ask means they get the information they need in the quickest way. We have proven success with gritting information during the recent snow event, when the presentation of information about gritting services stopped the equivalent of three adviser-days worth of calls to the contact team. Further, we can see that since separating out calls about missed bins, and giving recorded information people who call before 3pm that a bin is not “missed” until after 3pm, around a third of callers hang up after hearing that message, illustrating they got the information they needed in a one minute phone call. In January, those calls were the equivalent of almost three days of an adviser's time.

- 2.19 During the implementation of new services into, the active filtering allows calls to be diverted to specialists with deep knowledge, outside the contact centre, so that those service managers are able to make decisions and modify the service directly in response to customer feedback.
- 2.20 Where new advisers are being trained, we can make sure trainees only receive calls on subjects they can help the customer with.
- 2.21 To provide management information about the volume of calls on each service area so that the effect of promotions, changes to a service, efforts to move customers to online contact etc. can be monitored and managed.
- 2.22 In emergency circumstances (where we have no advisers available or have had to deploy them elsewhere) this menu function will allow us to give customers the opportunity to leave a message.
- 2.23 A new corporate policy on how voicemail is used will help customers access services rather than put a barrier between customers and services, and will make it clear what service level customers can expect and officers must deliver, outside of the contact centre.

Recommendation from Overview and Scrutiny

- 2.24 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had requested that the proposed changes to the Council's telephony system be presented to the Committee prior to consideration by Executive. At its meeting on 9 March 2010 the Committee agreed that this was a valuable initiative to further good customer service and emphasised the importance of careful planning and good management during the implementation phase to minimise the inconvenience to customers. The Committee endorsed the proposed changes and recommended Executive accept the proposals.

Key Issues for Consideration/Reasons for Decision and Options

- 3.1 Customer Satisfaction. Since moving to a central customer service approach to providing services, customer satisfaction levels as measured by the annual satisfaction survey have increased year on year. Changes since 2007:
 - Being able to speak to the right person 60% → 67%
 - Being respected/listened to by staff 68% → 74%
 - Staff knowledge 65% → 71%
 - Friendliness of staff 69% → 77%
 - Using plain English 72% → 79%
 - Answering all questions 63% → 71%
 - Explanations and advice 63% → 70%
 - Speed of response 57% → 62%
- 3.2 As members of the Local Government Customer Service Benchmark Group we can see that in the last "wave" of mystery shopping (October 2009) our "seconds to answer" score was slightly below the group average. We also performed better than the rest of the group in terms of answering the calls at

first contact. We transferred just 2% of calls in the last wave, compared with 11% for the Benchmark Group as a whole.

- 3.3 We have trialled the use of menus on two service lines since November 2009. Analysis of the customer feedback on the phone system shows that “time taken” is the subject of just a fifth of all feedback, and of that, the feedback is that “time taken” is “good” 71%, “average” 11% and “poor” 18%. Looking at “before” and “after” responses on the two lines trialling the menus, the introduction of menus has reduced the “good” % from 72% to 68%, which is not significant.
- 3.4 Productivity and value of the contact centre. Answering customers’ questions on the phone through recorded messaging, where the question is predictable and the answer universal, allows the scarce resource of a customer adviser to be best deployed speaking with customers who need services.
- 3.5 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 9 March considered these proposals and recommended that the Executive accept them.

The following options have been identified. The approach in the recommendations is believed to be the best way forward

Option One Divert 252535 into the contact centre as the **main** number for all council services, but also retain the “direct” lines for the services listed above. These numbers are already in wide circulation through publications and advertising, so customers who know what they need simply call the appropriate number and skip a step. The disadvantage of this approach is that the menu options would have to be directly under 252535. This would put an immediate additional barrier between the customer and someone who can help them. It would also distort the calculation of wait and abandoned rates.

Option Two Another alternative is to publish 252535 as the **only** number for all council services (along with direct dial numbers to council officers) and have it answered directly by the customer service advisers. There are many disadvantages to this option. While all fully-trained customer service advisers are capable of dealing with all enquiries and transactions for those parts of the services currently transferred into their remit (except new recruits still in training) the customer benefits of the contact centre system would be lost – as would the contact management benefits – without grouping of services. For instance:

- Advisers would have no idea what subject was about to be presented and so be much slower in delivering the information or service
- We would not be able to report on call volumes for each group of services,
- We would not be able to present recorded information to the customer with a high probability of answering their question, releasing capacity to deliver more services without needing more people
- Being able to give trainees only those calls they can deal with
- Overflow calls in times of high demand to specialists elsewhere in the council.

Advantages of this option are that we publish just one number for everything. However, given the range of numbers currently published this can also be a disadvantage.

Option Three

Continue as we are, reducing as speedily as possible the services that people have to use 252535 to reach, and advertising very prominently the contact centre numbers. While migrating customers away from 252535 appoint a dedicated telephone operator (it would take two to cover the whole day) to handle calls to 252535 thus leaving customer service advisers to talk solely with customers. Aim to converge 252535 with 227001 after two years.

Consultations

Customer callbacks where customers have ended the call after hearing the recorded information

Customer feedback through the “telemetric” service, which invites feedback at the end of each telephone call to customer service.

Implications

Financial:

There are no financial implications arising directly from these proposals. There may be a need to replace some phones where old models do not have the necessary functionality to manage voicemail efficiently but the costs of this are minimal.

Comments checked by Karen Curtin, Head of Finance
01295 221551

Legal:

There are no specific legal issues arising from this report.

Comments checked by Liz Howlett, Head of Legal and Democratic Services
01295 221686

Risk Management:

Customer satisfaction is at risk should the Council not have an effective telephony function. This has not been an issue to date but in an effort to achieve continuous improvement through the proposals in this report, this risk will be further minimised. In addition, the risk of an unsupported switchboard is removed.

Comments checked by Rosemary Watts, Risk Management and Insurance Officer
01295 221566

Wards Affected

All

Corporate Plan Themes

An accessible and value for money Council

Executive Portfolio

Councillor Nicholas Turner
Portfolio Holder for Customer Service and ICT

Document Information

Appendix No	Title
1	Diagram of the proposed telephone access arrangement
Background Papers	
None	
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Proposed future telephone arrangement

This diagram illustrates the model that is being proposed. The new series of number 7000 – 7009 will be introduced over time. The proposal allows up to 8 published service numbers plus general enquiries, with the four highest volume services at any one time being given a “filter” off the general enquiry number. Menu options on other services changes at different times of year; the council tax choice for example is different at annual billing than at other times, and will be adjusted to a maximum of four according to volume and nature of calls.

