

Slough Borough Council

Report to: Customer & Community Scrutiny Panel

Date: 06 July 2022

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Ward(s): All

For Information

Customer Services – Performance

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 This report informs members of this panel of the customer services performance and highlights proposed plans to drive improvements in this service area.

2. Recommendation(s)/proposed action

- 2.1 The Committee is requested to note and comment on the report.

Commissioners Comments

It is essential given the current circumstances that the authority has an effective customer services function. We are therefore supportive of this programme of work

3. Corporate Plan

- 3.1 In the recently published corporate plan “Doing right by Slough” customer services have been identified as an area of weakness needing a ‘re-evaluation of how this area is approached and delivered’. It is acknowledged that there are challenges facing the service and the wider organisation including the pace at which the integrated digital and channel shift programmes were previously implemented to improve customer contact processes.

As above, some of the challenges include:

- reduction in resources levels
- loss of trained and skilled customer service advisors
- increase in abandonment rate
- increase in wait time

- 3.2 It is critically important that the council addresses how it interacts, engages, and works with its diverse communities and any plans for improvement need to embrace the four council priorities:

- a council that lives within our means, balances the budget, and delivers best value for taxpayers and service users.

- an environment that helps residents live more independent, healthier, and safer lives
- a borough for young people and children to thrive
- infrastructure that reflects the uniqueness of Slough's place and a new vision for the town centre.

3.3 A new customer engagement strategy will be developed. The development of the strategy will run alongside the development of the digital strategy and is planned to be completed by March 2023. The development of this strategy will include the following:

- reviewing the end-to-end customer journey for the transactions taking place between the council and residents, making sure the focus is not just on the first point of contact, but the 'whole' experience through to resolution
- continual, iterative development of new channels and digital engagement methods that are adapted to respond to customer input and feedback
- building data capture into what is developed so that the council can use intelligence in a proactive way, to react to the changing needs of our residents
- improving the way, the Council communicates with residents
- adapting the approach for residents who are impacted by digital exclusion and ensure that these residents are not disadvantaged by a greater shift to new digital channels
- implementing efficient working practices to manage increasing transactional volumes as the population of the Slough grows

4. Customer Services Performance and Proposed Improvements

Background

4.1 The customer services team are responsible for the delivery of:

- the council's contact centre – this function is operated through a purpose-built facility on the ground floor of Observatory House, with staff answering enquiries over the phone and responding to general email enquiries.
- customer access points (CAPS) – the access points are based in Langley Library, Cippenham Library, Britwell Hub and the Chalvey Hub.
- Blue Badge applications – a statutory function that the customer services team administer, which involves assessment of all applications against set criteria.
- concessionary bus passes – administration and issuing of bus passes.

Impact of Phase 2 – Our Futures Programme

4.2 The customer services team and the functions of the contact centre were, and still are, the vital front door to engage with the Councils' services for resident. However, Phase 2 of the "Our Futures" restructure recommended a considerable downsizing of the customer services team, which was predicated on the council's progress on channel shift and digital by default, which would result in 'an estimated 80% of customers using on-line facilities for enquiries and information'.

Unfortunately, this estimation was not based on robust evidence and the very limited progress on the digitalisation and channel shift programmes has meant this has not been achieved and direct enquiries through the contact centre remain high (detailed in Appendix A)

Chart 1 - Call Centre Contact Volume April 2020 to March 2021

Chart 2 - Call Centre Contact Volume April 2021 to March 2022

Chart 3 - Call Centre Contact Volume April 2022 to May 2022

- 4.3 In March 2020 the customer contact centre, based in Landmark Place, closed to the public. Before its closure the customer service centre dealt with up to 36,000 face to face appointments annually. Its closure coincided with the first national lockdown, caused by the Covid Pandemic. This inevitably changed the way customers contacted the Council and reduced their options for contacting the Council, especially face to face. This resulted in an increase in the number of calls and email enquiries received, which put additional pressure on the customer services team. Customers were also previously able to visit the cashiers team based in Landmark Place previously to pay their council bills, including council tax and rent. This service was also discontinued in the Phase 2 Our Futures programme without implementing cashless transactions and has resulted in some customers who are unable to complete financial transactions on-line being disadvantaged.
- 4.4 To achieve the Our Futures staffing restructure and achieve savings targets, there was a phased downsizing of the CSA team. From May 2021 through to September 2021 all agency staff and staff on fixed term contracts were exited. The team in March 2022 were operating with 36.7 fte CSAs; previously in March 2021 there were 54 fte.
- 4.5 From the above it was clear that the service did not achieve the transformation that was intended. The service experienced a greater demand level, high waiting times and an increase in complaints resulted.

Service Performance

4.6 Chart 1 - April 2020 to March 2021

Looking at the Contact Centre performance for 2020 / 21 and calls as this is the busiest contact method, the overall contact volume can be seen to be 207,332. The team answered 159,388 with a total of around 54 FTE to help achieve the answer rate of 76.9%.

Chart 2 - April 2021 to March 2022

The call volume remained the same in this financial year compared to previous financial year (from 207,332 in 2020/21 to 208,773 in 2021/22). However, the answer rate decreased from 76.9% to 50.8%. The team answered 53,273 less calls compared to same period last year. This can largely be attributed to the reduction in resource levels.

Chart 3 - April 2022 to May 2022

The team have had support in recruiting additional members of staff on a temporary basis following successful approval of a business case. Visible improvements already being made with answer rates and wait times in the months of April and May.

Chart 4 – Average Response Time - April 2020 to March 2022

This chart demonstrates the effect of wait times being adversely impacted due to reduced resource levels.

Planned Potential Service Improvements

- 4.7 Given the challenges with the performance of the service a number of short- and medium-term actions are being undertaken
- 4.8 In March 2022 the service was given approval to recruit an extra eighteen **temporary customer service advisors**. Due to the time required for recruitment and training the temporary staff's impact was not seen immediately. However, the Council is now seeing the impact of this extra resource and performance is improving with data for May indicating that over 55% of calls are now being answered (see appendix B) as opposed to 35.2% in October 2021. Call waiting times have also improved for most service-related areas. However, it needs to be recognised the service has peaks of demand from residents when for example Council tax letters are sent out or reminders. During these periods the team experience extremely high volumes of council tax enquiries which inevitably affects the wait times for calls to be answered. Customer Services have trained 8 of the new additional resources in June to specifically handle council tax and benefit enquiries. This extra resource will be manning the council tax lines from the week beginning 27 June
- 4.9 Appendix A shows data collected from April 2021 to March 2022 which demonstrates the high demand and high call wait times before the recruitment of additional resources. By the way of example, it can be seen that:
 - In 2020/21 the average monthly call wait time was around 3 min 27 secs
 - In 2021/22 the average monthly call wait time was around 14 min 30 secs, was an increase of 11 mins 03 sec compared to the year before.
- 4.10 In the longer term and in order to ensure service improvements can be maintained the service is examining proposals to **re-model customer services** which if affordable would ensure that the team has the capacity and resource to be able to meet the customer demands with the flexibility to downsize when the channel shift and digital by default programmes take effect. The service would look to develop, and if then approved and affordable, action changes by April 2023, following a formal consultation process.
- 4.11 Work will commence in July to establish and **review current processes** in place for customer engagement, including what the customer journey currently looks like. It will focus on high demand services and the most common enquiries and priority transactions people need to do. Emphasis will be to support the development of independent customers, establishing accessible and easy to use self-serve and digital solutions to enquiries. This will then free up resources to be

diverted to deal with our more vulnerable residents and those with complex issues and cases. These are likely to be smaller transactional processes and will be useful but the major change is noted below

4.12 Work is currently underway to develop and progress the organisation’s **digital by default strategy**. Alongside this the Council will develop an updated customer engagement strategy that will align with the council’s new corporate priorities as part of the wider recovery plan and will incorporate the approach to digital customer engagement. The Council will ensure that there is better engagement and interaction with residents to ascertain what really matters to them and build on this insight in the future development and delivery of services. This digital work will be a long term programme of work and will require all service areas to engage with the required governance and process of moving to ‘digital by default’ for all relevant transactions so that the end-to-end customer experience is efficient and effective

4.13 The table below provides a current timeline for planned activities to address service improvement

Activity	By when
Proposals for the re-modelling of the customer services team drafted, if fundable	October 2022
Report monthly to CLT and commissioners on performance against priority targets	October 2022
Establish a customer engagement working group to review: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the customer journey – how our customers contact and interact with us why do our customers contact us? most common enquiries in high demand services identify council services peak periods and actions to mitigate surges in demand what can be easily automated / self-serve for customers? how do we currently engage with our customers and gather customer satisfaction/insight? How do we approach this going forward? 	Group starts meeting July 2022 Initial findings reported to CLT October 2022
Work with the council tax and benefits teams to identify priority transactions for initial automation, providing customer insight from the customer services team. Will be a long term programme	Initial work by September 2022
Work with the ICT and digital team and council services in the development of the digital strategy and implementation plan which will review the council’s approach to digital customer engagement. The initial work will report as shown	September 2022
Monthly reporting, tracking and reviews of digital progress will be in place from	January 2023
True digitisation will again be a long term programme	

Produce a new customer engagement / experience strategy, that builds on customer insight, responding to customer input and feedback and embraces the new approach to digital customer engagement.	March 2023
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5. Other implications

(a) Financial implications

The financial implications of the longer-term options are not yet worked up but no proposals will be taken forward without a full financial analysis developed as part of the work reviews

(b) Legal implications

The Council has various statutory duties to deliver services and the customer service teams support departments in the delivery of the same. The method of residents, taxpayers and service users contacting the Council and the method of responding to resident and service user's concerns is not prescribed, but the Council should take account of its overarching and specific duties when changing service provision and in particular must ensure it complies with its Equality Act duties.

The role of the customer and community panel is to scrutinise functions falling within the scope of the corresponding cabinet portfolios and any non-executive functions or matters associated with those portfolios. The panel is currently considering its work programme following an annual work programming event. It will be necessary to ensure that the panel co-ordinates its programme with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and other panels and that this is properly aligned to the Council's Corporate Plan and recovery themes. The panel should consider what work it can undertake, including outside of formal committee meetings, to ensure it adds value to the recovery theme of improving resident and customer engagement.

(c) Risk management implications

Associated risks are detailed in the table below with control measures identified:

Risks/threats/opportunities	Current controls	Future controls
Resources cannot meet the high customer demand	Recruit temporary staff within the financial envelope which have been approved to end of the financial year	Remodelling the service structure that identifies required resource and recruit permanent staff to reduce reliance on agency workers
Failure to retain trained temporary staff	Work with recruitment agencies to identify suitable replacement staff	Look to implement new team structure and appoint permanent staff.

Current cost of living crisis will increase enquires from residents to explore support options available for them such as support for inability to pay council tax and what local welfare assistance is available.	Council website has been updated with information to assist residents to resolve their query Insight is gathered and shared between services to address demand and review methods to improve communications with residents	Ensure good and updated information is easily accessible on the council's website.
Development and progress of the organization's approach to digital customer engagement fails to deliver to set timescales. If solutions are not easy and efficient to use for customers, then they will continue to revert to contacting the council by phone.	Group Manager sits on delivery group for digital engagement; informed and updated on progress.	Customer engagement strategy identifies key dependencies and solutions for self-serve development as described in digital strategy
Continued reluctance for customers to use digital / on-line solutions for transactions	Staff are assisting customers through the on-line process	New solutions and channels need to be accessible, easy and quick to use.
Not meeting statutory requirements for the administration and issuing of Blue Badges to qualifying residents	Prioritise the administration of this area and have nominated trained staff to deal with these queries	Have bespoke, nominated and trained staff in place to administer the scheme
A high number of complaints, some being escalated to the Ombudsman leading to reputational damage to the council, possible financial penalties and the loss of confidence and trust from our residents	All complaints are answered following corporate policy and procedures, ensuring timescales are met	All complaints are answered following corporate policy and procedures, ensuring timescales are met.

(d) Equality implications

- i. The Public Sector Equality Duty, which came into force on 05 April 2011, ensures that all public bodies play their part in making society fairer by tackling discrimination and providing equality of opportunity for all. It ensures that public bodies consider the needs of all individuals in their day-to-day work, in shaping policy, in delivering services, and in relation to their own employees.
- ii. It is essential that all residents can access customer services in a timely and appropriate way. Whilst some customers have moved to on-line, self-service, the customer services contact centre remains the single most common way to contact the council, with over 4,000 enquires received a week.
- iii. Failure to have some form of service for residents to make direct contact with an advisor would directly impact those who are unable to use digital

services or have no access to the internet and this would result in a disproportionately negative impact on those individuals. This may apply particularly to those with disabilities and older people, who are more likely to be digitally excluded.

- iv. It is essential that the council maintains a fit for purpose service that maximises access opportunities for all residents and especially those who are unable to contact us and get support using alternative means.

6. **Conclusion**

- 6.1 The impact of additional resource in the customer services team is seeing a gradual improvement in performance, as the new temporary staff assimilate into their roles. Managers are currently developing an action plan aimed at making the necessary improvements to the service to ensure our residents are able to receive a good level of service
- 6.2 The customer services team will continue to require additional resources until digital capability is working effectively and lowering the volume of direct contacts. The capability must include the ability of the back-office services to respond well to interactions with the new channels in development.

7. **Appendices**

- **Appendix A** – Call Centre Contact Volumes – April 2020 to May 2022 –
- **Appendix B** – Percentage of Calls Answered from October 2021 to May 2022

8. **Background papers**

None

Appendix A

Chart 1 – Call Centre Contact Volume - April 2020 to March 2021

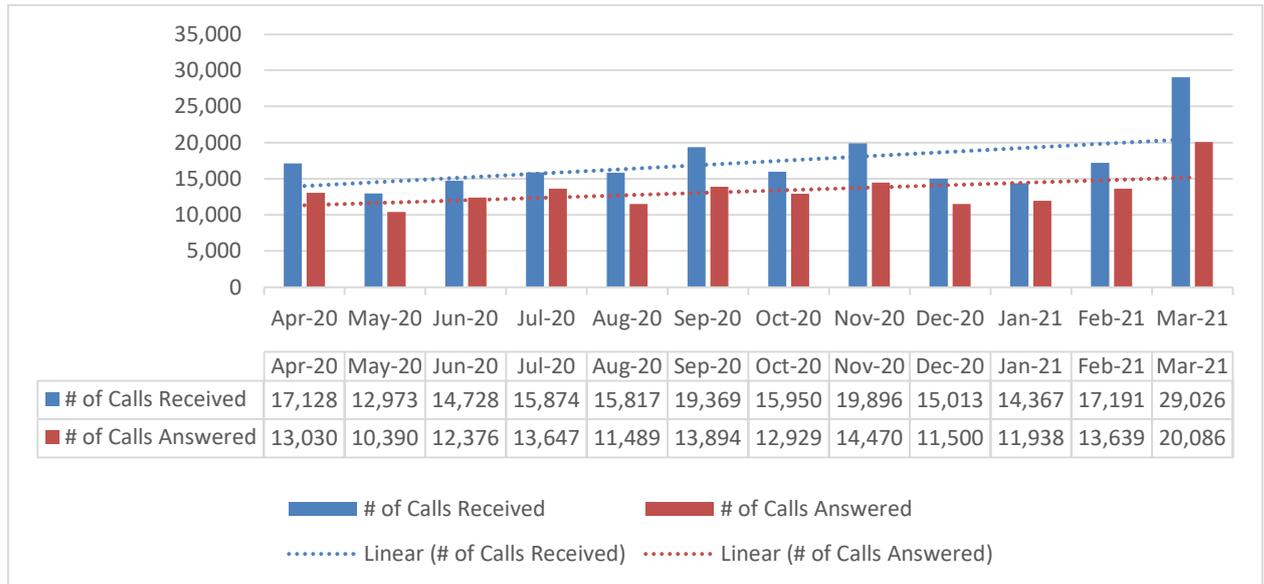


Chart 2- Call Centre Contact Volume - April 2021 to March 2022

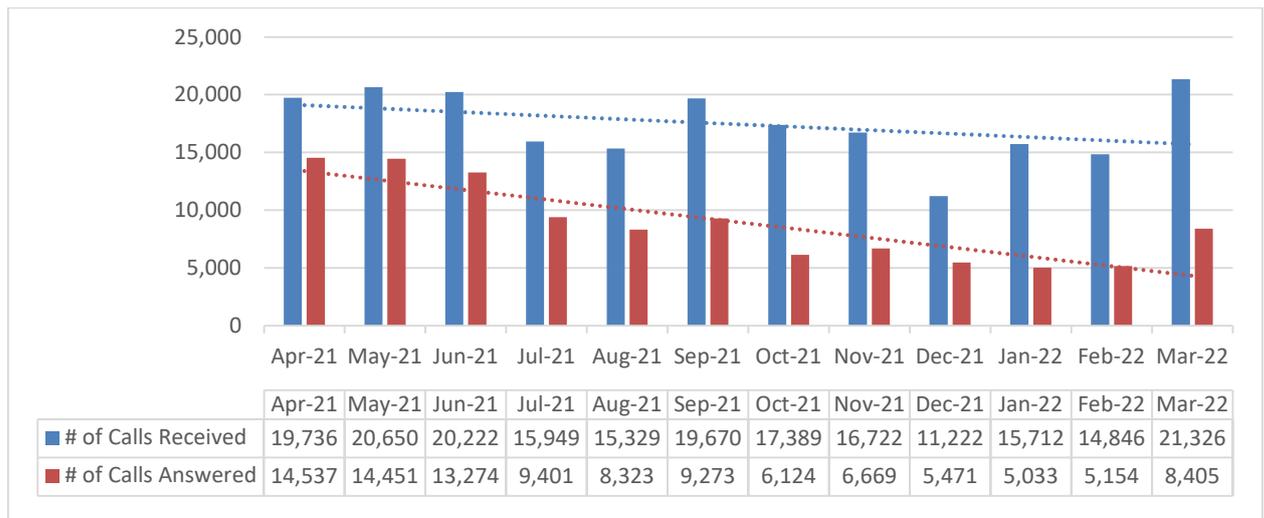
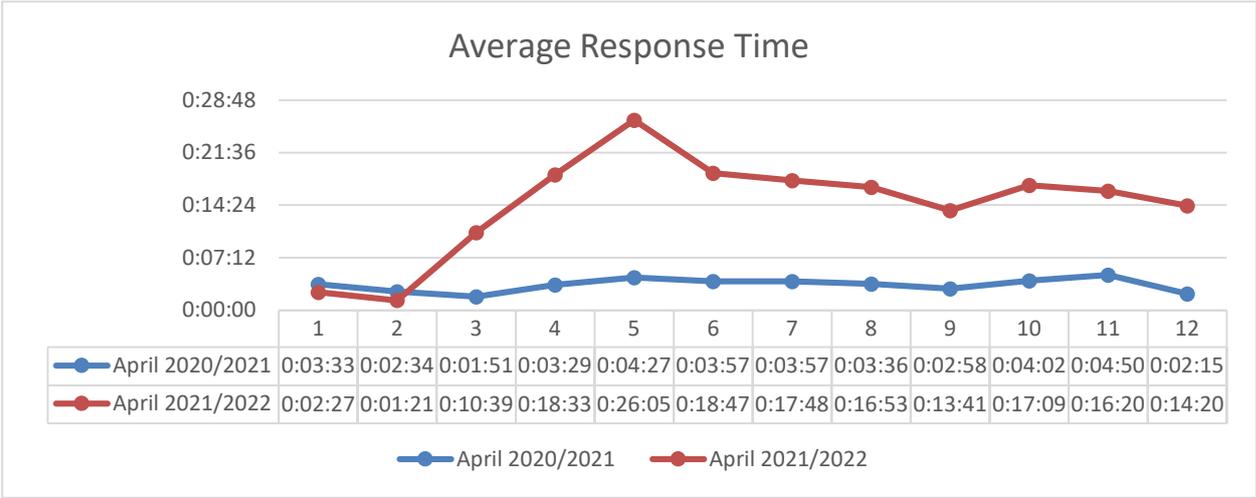


Chart 3 – Call Centre Contact Volume - April 2022 to March 2023



Chart 4 – Average Response Time - April 2020 to March 2022



Appendix B

Percentage of Calls Answered from October 2021 to May 2022

