



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL



Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

5 July 2023

Councillor Rhea Rayside – Cabinet
Member for People and Communities

Customer Service update

Report Author

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Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with the outturn position for 2022/23 regarding customer interactions and call handling as at 31 March 2023 within the Customer Service team and high contact service areas. The report will also provide an update regarding the review of the Customer Experience Strategy and various projects being undertaken by the service.

Recommendations

That the Committee

1. Notes the report and are invited to ask questions relating to the report.

Decision Information

Does the report contain any exempt or confidential information not for publication?	No
What are the relevant corporate priorities?	High performing Council
Which wards are impacted?	All wards

1. Implications

Taking into consideration implications relating to finance and procurement, legal and governance, risk and mitigation, health and safety, diversity and inclusion, safeguarding, staffing, community safety, mental health and wellbeing and the impact on the Council's declaration of a climate change emergency, the following implications have been identified:

Finance and Procurement

1.1 There are currently no financial or procurement implications to this report.

Completed by: Richard Wyles, Chief Finance Officer

Legal and Governance

1.2 There are currently no legal or governance implications to this report.

Completed by: Graham Watts, Assistant Director of Governance and Monitoring Officer

2. Background to the Report

2.1 A telephony and call handling report was presented to Finance, Economic and Development Overview and Committee on 22 November 2022. The report focussed on the position regarding call handling.

2.2 The Customer Service Team handle customer interactions in various ways for 15 service areas, as well as general public enquiries.

2.3 This report will focus on the customer interactions during 2022/23, the call handling position as of 31 March 2023 and will provide the Committee with an update regarding various projects being undertaken , which includes:

- Customer Experience Strategy review and refresh
- Rollout of softphone telephony solution
- Implementation of Virtual Operator

Customer Interactions – 2022/23

2.4 The number of customer interactions received into the Customer Service Team in 2022/23 was the highest it has been for the last 3 years

	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20
Telephone calls (Press 1 etc)	108,201	103,000	94,680	90,076
Switchboard calls	42,039	51,895	55,792	49,033
Total calls	150,240	154,903	150,472	139,109
Face to Face	5,677	1,897	122	31,283
Emails	27,004	28,118	29,323	10,388
Total other	32,681	30,015	29,445	41,671
Grantham walk-in	3,959	1,220	0	21,183
Grantham appointments	464	157	57	512
Bourne walk-in	223	41	0	121
Bourne appointments	1,021	479	65	1,432
Bourne library	22,694	11,848	4,149	46,405
Deepings walk-in*	0	0	0	1,471
Stamford walk-in*	0	0	0	569
Stamford appointments*	0	0	0	5,995
Total walk-in	28,371	13,745	4,271	77,688
Total interactions	211,292	198,663	184,188	258,468

* Following public consultation regarding opening hours, the decision was taken to remove front facing customer service at both the Deepings and Stamford customer access points.

2.5 Analysis has been undertaken as to the number of visitors to Grantham Guildhall Arts Centre from Deeping and Stamford post codes during 2022/23 (recording started in June 2022):

- PE6 – Deepings = 22
- PE9 – Stamford = 60
- Prefer not to say = 457

2.6 Customers do have access to a payment kiosk at both Deeping Library and Stamford Arts Centre. There is also a telephone and PC access point at Stamford Arts Centre.

2.7 These interactions will be analysed further, in particular to overlay website interactions to ascertain where there was an increase in use of website, with specific

focus on the “Apply for it, Pay for it, Report it” and to determine in which areas channel shift has been successful.

2.8 The work involved for the customer interaction is linked to the review of the Customer Experience Strategy, which is detailed in paragraphs 2.24 to 2.25.

Weekly customer contact handled by Customer Service Team – 31 March 2023

2.9 The table below shows the weekly customer contact handled by the Customer Service Team. This data is as of 31 March 2023 for WC 27 March 2023.

2.10 Of the 444 staffing hours available (12FTE), all customer contacts totalled 534.75 hours, meaning there was a failure demand for 90.75 hours of customer contact. This failure demand would be a combination of calls not being handled (13%) or emails being responded to beyond the 8 working day target.

2.11 Since mid-March, the team have been carrying 7FTE vacant posts. The impact of these vacancies is detailed further in paragraph 2.15 to 2.17.

	31 March 2023	Average time taken	Total time taken (hrs)
Total FTE available	12	N/A	444

Contact Type	Contact Volume		
Calls offered	(3,667)	5 mins	306
Calls handled	3,178		
% Answered	87%		
Face to Face – Grantham (includes walk-ins and appointments)	119	20 mins	40
Face to Face – Bourne (walk-ins)	15	10 mins	2.5
Face to Face – Bourne (library)	420	10 mins	70
Emails – Customer Service	349	5 mins	29
Emails – Housing evidence	219	5 mins	18.25
Emails – Green Waste	239	5 mins	20
Housing Register applications	49	60 mins	49
Total customer contacts	4,571		534.75

2.12 Once all 7FTE vacancies have been recruited to, this will increase the available FTE per week to 4.9FTE or 181 hours (taking into account 30% shrinkage for annual leave and unplanned absences such as sickness).

2.13 Taking WC 27 March 2023 as an example, this will further increase the available hours from 444 to 625 per week and therefore resulting in an improvement performance in call handling and email response times. Going forward, the

improvement will be variable as other factors such as customer interaction volumes and absences will need to be considered.

- 2.14 Benchmarking has been undertaken with the other Lincolnshire Districts, and it is clear all Districts offer a different level of service from their Customer Service Teams. As a result, the volume of customer interactions handed by the Customer Service Teams is also significantly different with our team receiving more interactions than any other District across Lincolnshire.

Impacts of vacancies within the team

- 2.15 The 7FTE vacancies are a combination of full and part time, as well as permanent and fixed term within the budget.

- 2.16 The vacancies are due to a variety of reasons from retirement, resignation and advisers moving into other service areas within the Council. The latter is always inevitable as the Customer Service Advisers handle enquiries for 15 different service areas and as a result they are multi-skilled. Therefore, when vacancies arise in these service areas, they have relevant experience to enable them to successfully progress their careers into other areas across the Council. The reasons for the vacancies are detailed below:

- Moving to another service area = 3 officers
- Career progression (away from SKDC) = 2 officers
- Retirement = 1 officer (1 further officer due to retire in July)
- Personal/family caring commitments = 1 officer

- 2.17 Recruitment has taken place, with all vacant posts being recruited to. The final recruit is due to join the team on 3 July 2023. Training of the new staff is comprehensive and will take between six and nine months to complete for all 15 service areas.

Call Handling

- 2.18 Statistics are produced and issued by the Customer Service Co-Ordinator on a weekly and monthly basis to the relevant service areas. The information includes number of calls offered, handled, abandoned and average speed of answer.

- 2.19 Performance clinics with service are continuing on a fortnightly or monthly basis which enable the Customer Service Team have a platform to be able to advise of upcoming changes.

- 2.20 Service areas have been able to advise of pressures experienced in the previous week and explain these, along with clarification as to whether these are one off, or likely to be ongoing. Discussions have taken place as to:
- Ongoing pressures: Service Team to advise how the pressures will be addressed – such as review of staffing, increased staffing, change to working practices etc.
 - Ad hoc pressure: Service Team to advise if this is expected in coming weeks/months i.e. mail out created surge in customer contact, annual leave etc.
- 2.21 The graphs in **Appendix 1** show call handling between March 2023 and January 2022 for high volume service areas (where calls are directed into agent queue i.e. the customer has been taken through the 'Press 1, Press 2' route).

Customer Experience Strategy – Review and Refresh

- 2.22 The Customer Service Management team have undertaken a thorough review of the current Customer Experience Strategy, looking at the activities which have been achieved (and how), alongside those that have not been achieved, and most importantly why.
- 2.23 An action plan will be produced, which will be included within the next update report presented to this committee for review and comments of the next steps.

Telephony solutions update

- 2.24 The Performance and Customer Improvement Lead is managing this project and is currently working with IT to move all staff to soft phones by 30 June 2023. This means a physical handset will not be needed and all calls can be received through the officers laptop.
- 2.25 The introduction of the telephony solution is enabling staff to set up voicemail and call forwarding to ensure all calls are handled appropriately. Where voicemail has been set up, an email will be issued to the officer with the message transposed into text format.

Virtual Operator

- 2.26 A Virtual Operator (VO) solution will be introduced from 1 October 2023, allowing callers to the council to be greeted and automatically routed to the extension or service area directly. This would improve the speed of which calls are handled and reduce the need for CSA's to answer switchboard, allowing them time to undertake other activities within the service (circa 0.33%).
- 2.27 The VO will be provided through our current telephony provider, Mitel, for switchboard calls, which will reduce the number of calls to the traditional manual switchboard requiring processing by Customer Service Advisor's.
- 2.28 The system works by voice activation and speech recognition, asking the caller to state which service or officer they require, by name. The call is then transferred immediately into the call queue or directly to that officer if the line is available.
- 2.29 Our customers will see a positive improvement in their customer journey:
- A VO keeps phone lines covered at all times and helps to correctly direct customers without the need to re-dial, if busy.
 - Providing the customer correctly states which service or officer they require; the call will be routed correctly first time. The current IVR (Press 1, press 2 options) can be complex, with customers often choosing the wrong department, requiring them to be re-routed – resulting in a longer call time than necessary.
 - This provides a consistently good customer journey every time a customer contacts SKDC with calls routed to the right people every time.

3. Key Considerations

- 3.1 These are set out in the report.

4. Other Options Considered

- 4.1 All options for improvement are included within the report.

5. Reasons for the Recommendations

- 5.1 A Customer Service update report will be provided to this committee on a quarterly basis.

6. Appendices

6.1 There is one appendix attached to this report:

- Appendix 1: Call Handling between March 2023 and January 2022