



**Audit & Standards Committee
Report**

Report of: Mark Bennett, Director of HR and Customer Services

Date: 24 March 2022

Subject: Customer Services Contact Centre Performance

Author of Report: Paul Taylor, Head of Customer Services

Summary:

This report provides an overview of 2021-22 year to date performance for Customer Services Contact Centre. The report identifies issues that affect performance and identifies future developments and areas for improvement.

The report is presented by the Director of HR and Customer Services who is responsible for Customer Services.

Recommendations:

The Audit & Standards Committee is asked to consider the report in order to provide its view on the future performance of service, the improvements proposed, and the issues raised.

Background Papers:

None

Category of Report: OPEN

Statutory and Council Policy Checklist

Financial Implications
Legal Implications
Equality of Opportunity Implications
NO

Tackling Health Inequalities Implications
NO
Human rights Implications
NO:
Environmental and Sustainability implications
NO
Economic impact
NO
Community safety implications
NO
Human resources implications
NO
Property implications
NO
Area(s) affected
None
Relevant Cabinet Portfolio Lead
Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources & Governance
Relevant Scrutiny Committee if decision called in
Not applicable
Is the item a matter which is reserved for approval by the City Council?
NO
Press release
NO

Contact Centre Performance Q3 2021-22

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Council's Corporate Contact Centre takes telephone enquiries for customers for the following services:
- Council Housing
 - Council Housing Repairs
 - Revenues and Benefits
 - Corporate – comprising 17 Services
 - Out of Hours – comprising Emergency Repairs, Homeless, Childrens and Adults Social Services

2.0 SUMMARY

- 2.1 This report provides an overview of Contact Centre performance for Quarter 3 of financial year 2021/22 and Quarter 4 up to 28th February 2022, and outlines issues impacting upon performance.
- 2.2 The report identifies areas for improvement in performance and key ongoing and future developments.

3.0 PERFORMANCE OVERVIEW QUARTER 3 AND QUARTER 4 TO DATE

- 3.1 The performance details below cover performance during Quarter 3 of the financial year 2021/22 and Quarter 4 performance up to 28th February 2022.

The Contact Centre has a Key Performance Indicator to answer 85% of all calls offered. Q3 performance by service area is shown in the tables below together with Q4 performance up to 28th February.

REVENUES AND BENEFITS

	Offered	Answered	% Answered	Average waiting time
Q3	40565	17442	43%	33:19

Q4 to 28 th Feb	30592	12450	41%	34:24
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CORPORATE

	Offered	Answered	% Answered	Average waiting time
Q3	45590	37066	81%	03:44
Q4 to date	35461	22569	64%	08:13

COUNCIL HOUSING

	Offered	Answered	% Answered	Average waiting time
Q3	42959	35415	82%	05:26
Q4 to date	33114	24072	73%	09:30

COUNCIL HOUSING REPAIRS

	Offered	Answered	% Answered	Average waiting time
Q3	83623	34868	42%	28:18
Q4 to date	63646	26509	42%	22:48

EMERGENCY OUT OF HOURS

	Offered	Answered	% Answered	Average waiting time
Q3	19438	12156	63%	03:43
Q4 to date	13280	9162	69%	02:50

4.0 ISSUES IMPACTING PERFORMANCE

- 4.1 The financial year 2021/22 has been a particularly challenging one for the Sheffield City Council Contact Centre. During the pandemic period the service rose well to the challenges that were posed, not least being able to deliver the service with a workforce which became primarily home-based. However the emergence from the pandemic has been challenging. During 2021 people were once again able to report all repairs, rather than just emergencies, and reminder notifications sent

for rent arrears and Council Tax debts. Actions such as these impacted very strongly on the work of the Contact Centre and the ripple effect from those challenges remains. Customer expectation has also shifted significantly but the service has not yet had any real opportunity to change the operating model of the service.

- 4.2 Seven experienced Customer Services staff moved to the Council's Test, Track, and Isolate Team when this was created in 2020 and remain there until 31st March 2022. The posts have been backfilled but the loss of experience has had an impact. There has been a rise in staff sickness during January and February and this has impacted on performance. Some of this relates to staff being absent with Covid, however it should be acknowledged that some of that sickness is related to the pressures which our advice team feel themselves to be under during this busy period.
- 4.3 In terms of specific Contact Centre strands, the Revenues and Benefits (R&B) strand is the one which has the most challenges. The R&B service has been under some continual pressure since the pandemic began to ease. People who had not been chased for missed payments and arrears during the worst of the pandemic period were then sent reminder letters, follow-up letters and in some cases summonses. This resulted in a high volume of calls which has carried on substantially unabated from summer 2021. As an example, 18,000 reminder letters were sent out in batches during February, with a further 3,700 going out in March at the same time as new Council Tax bills were being issued.
- 4.4 Pre-pandemic, once the "back office" Revenues team had been insourced from Capita, there were discussions around how we could engender greater fluidity of movement between the Contact Centre and the back-office team. We know that many personnel in both teams have the skills and knowledge to move temporarily from one team to the other as demand requires. However once the pandemic impacted, the focus of these discussions was lost. There are plans to revisit this and get this back on track.
- 4.5 In terms of Council House Repairs the key change over recent months has been the introduction of the new Total Mobile system. The system has been designed for speed in terms of logging requests and is much simpler. The new system went live in November 2021; as might be expected with any new system there were some significant teething problems which meant that the benefits of the new system were not apparent immediately. However, we are now seeing increasing evidence of the benefits of the new systems with the numbers of calls being taken by the advice team on this strand improving.
- 4.6 In addition the last few months have seen a good deal of effective joint working between the management teams from the Contact Centre and Repairs and Maintenance. In September 2021 a 21-point Action Plan was agreed between the two services. A lot of the focus has been on trying to reduce the number of chase calls (i.e. those people needing to get in touch with the Contact Centre because e.g. an appointment has been missed, the operative has not turned up etc.). These calls have been running sometimes at over 30% of all calls received; by their nature these calls take longer to deal with and this in turn impacts on overall performance. Both management teams continue to work to reduce the numbers of chase calls. In addition, since Summer 2021 the Contact Centre has been offering an additional daytime service on Saturdays (and during the first few weeks on Sundays as well), whereby people can ring in with non-urgent Repairs.
- 4.7 A significant change which is ongoing – helped by the change to the Total Mobile system - is to blend the Housing and Repairs Contact Centre teams so that the advisors across the two teams can work on either strand. This change should be fully complete by the Autumn.

4.8 It should be noted that the performance statistics included in this report cover the period to 28th February. Performance during March has been strong across the Housing and Corporate strands and continues to steadily improve in terms of Repairs. However R&B performance remains extremely challenging.

5.0 IMPROVEMENTS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

5.1 The performance of the SCC Contact Centre has been very much under the spotlight during recent months, including from elected members and from internal forums such as the Performance and Delivery Leadership Board. Various improvements have recently been put in place or are in train. These include:

- a) Continued work on improving the relationship with “back office” services, with whom close liaison is crucial to ensure a joined-up approach in dealing with what our callers need;
- b) The development of technological innovations to help improve the customer journey. These include live chat and the natural language facility (both due to be piloted in the next few weeks);
- c) Cross-skilling of the Housing and Repairs team (as per point 4.7 above);
- d) The creation of a Contact Centre Performance Manager post (job description currently being agreed);
- e) A revisiting of Team Leader duties to underline the focus needed on performance management;
- f) A proposed return to a rolling recruitment programme for the Contact Centre, minimising gaps when people move on from the service.

5.2 A Peer Review of Customer Services by the Local Government Association (LGA) - focusing in particular on the Contact Centre - took place in December 2021. Feedback from the Peer Review has resonance beyond simply Customer Services. The feedback acknowledges the work currently being done at Portfolio and service level to put customer service front and centre, and the “collective goodwill internally to get this right”. However the feedback goes on to note that *to address the performance challenges, customer service as an ethos and a responsibility, needs to be collectively owned across the organisation...for SCC to make meaningful inroads it will require a dedicated focus, organisational buy-in, culture change and investment – of both time and resources – to break down the siloed approach to customers and transform services.*”

5.3 The feedback suggested a number of “quick win” areas. Many of these (e.g. live chat, natural language) are already under consideration but all will be considered further. The LGA have now offered to provide an ongoing critical friend challenge as we seek to pull together an Action Plan to help meet the recommendations made. The LGA also offered the possibility of some small grant funding to help support our work on improving the customer journey. We will be using this towards the creation of a customer portal, which will facilitate the creation of a Single Customer Account. This will provide a simple, joined up way to access and manage information, and allow customers to access their information – and make payments – online. Although it will take some months to bring this development online it should over time significantly reduce the numbers of calls made to the Contact Centre.

5.4 Under the Our Sheffield strand of the SCC One Year Plan, officers have been working closely with the Our Council Transitional Committee to develop a checklist of the elements which together create a Customer Service Ethos and point the way to a programme of work to support this. This includes:

- Clear standards: For everyone to work to, supported by performance measures and Business Information
- Staffing: Recruited, trained, and supported to deliver excellent customer service, and who have the autonomy and authority to make decisions when dealing with customers
- Technology tools and solutions: IT and telephony designed to support staff to do their job, and meet customer needs
- Customer Insight: An understanding of and engagement with customers to design user friendly services
- User designed: Access to user designed services including online, for those customers who are happy to use them

Work is now under way to create the internal mechanism to deliver this programme of work. The Our Council Transitional Committee are clear that a key beneficiary of this work will be the SCC Contact Centre. The Committee has also emphasised that they understand the excellent work being done by front-line Contact Centre staff; the current challenges are systemic, and not about the people.

In summary Customer Services is linking the new post-pandemic normal with an ambition that Sheffield citizens receive the services and information that they want from the Council in the ways that they want to receive them. This includes giving quicker, more simple online access to all those who want to use services in this way, meaning quicker access to the Contact Centre for those who choose or need that method of contact. This approach is also reflected in the ongoing rethinking of the First Point face to face service.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 The Audit & Standards Committee is asked to consider the report in order to provide its view on the performance of the Contact Centre and the issues raised.

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