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# CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE TASK GROUP REPORT

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RESOURCES AND PERFORMANCE SELECT COMMITTEE

SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL

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6 January 2021

## CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE TASK GROUP REPORT

### Purpose of report

- To note the progress of the Customer Experience Task Group to date.
- To agree the recommendations.
- To conclude the work of the Customer Experience Task Group given the limitations placed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Introduction

1. The Customer Experience Task Group (the Task Group) was convened in early 2020 in response to discussion at the 18 October 2019 meeting of the Resources and Performance Select Committee. The aim was to conduct a 'deep dive' into customers' experiences when interacting with Council services, in the context of the major programme of transformation that the Council is undergoing. Its definition of customers focused on residents and other external customers, and their interaction with, chiefly, the Council's Contact Centre.
2. The Membership of the Task Group is as follows: Cllrs Nick Harrison (Chairman of the Task Group), Will Forster, Bob Gardner, Chris Townsend and Richard Walsh.
3. The Task Group undertook a creative and practical approach towards scrutiny that extended beyond formal committee meetings. This included in-person visits and a survey. Relevant materials from the Task Group's meetings were also published on the Council's website in order to encourage public engagement with its activity and to ensure its work was as open as possible.
4. Having met four times between February and April 2020, the Task Group's work, towards the end of its review, was unfortunately disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Benchmarking visits to other county councils' customer services departments had to be postponed, as Members were keen to conduct these in person in order to get the most out of these visits. Due to the long-lasting and

volatile nature of the pandemic, and the recently rising impact of its second wave, however, it became apparent that in-person benchmarking visits would not be feasible.

5. In addition, given the limitations of remote meetings in this instance, as well as other pressing socio-economic priorities combined with the second wave of Covid-19, virtual visits to other local authorities are not deemed suitable to provide the desired 'real feel' and sense of customer experience and service.
6. Due to the pandemic, the Customer Services team had also been required to prioritise Covid-19 response activities to support vulnerable residents, such as operating the Community Helpline and working with Public Health to set up the Local Tracing Partnership for Surrey.

### **Meetings of the Task Group**

7. The Task Group first met on 4 February 2020 for a discussion on the general background and trajectory of its work. Background papers used in the formation of the Task Group, as well as the scoping document, have been published on the Council's website and can be found here: [4 February meeting papers](#).
8. Thereon, the Task Group met on 2 March 2020 for a session in which officers gave a presentation and answered Members' questions on the Residents' Survey. Relevant materials, including the minutes of the meeting, can be found here: [2 March meeting papers](#).
9. On 6 March 2020, the Task Group conducted a day-long visit to the Surrey County Council Contact Centre, which is often the first point of contact for residents. Materials from that meeting can be found here: [6 March meeting papers](#).
10. Subsequently, the Task Group met remotely (using Skype) on 3 April 2020 and discussed, among other topics, how the Task Group could function during the Covid-19 pandemic. Minutes of this meeting can be found on the Council's website: [3 April meeting minutes](#).

### **Members' Survey**

11. Simultaneous to its meetings detailed above, the Task Group conducted an anonymous survey for Members on their residents' and their own interactions with Customer Services.
12. An online link to the survey on the topic was sent to all County Council Members on 12 February 2020. Members were then reminded about the survey and the link was resent a month later, on 12 March.

13. Moreover, a number of paper copies were handed out to Members on 24 February at an all-Member seminar. The results from these paper copies were then input to digital form, so the final digital results represent all responses received.
14. The survey received 26 responses overall. It was conducted anonymously, but respondents were given the option to enter their name at the end of the survey, if they so wished.
15. A description and analysis of the survey results can be found below as Annex 1.

### **Summary of Members' Survey**

16. The key takeaways from the Members' survey are:
  - Highways was the most common topic of queries;
  - Respondents stated the belief that there are certainly advantages to residents being able to contact Members directly with their queries, with this existing alongside the Customer Services routes;
  - Respondents often referred residents to Customer Services routes;
  - Most respondents praised the efficiency and effectiveness of the Council's Customer Services, as well as the friendly and helpful nature of staff. However, some raised issues about inconsistency of response, lack of conclusion to some queries, and a lack of information shared with Members by Customer Services; and
  - Some respondents noted that Members' interactions with Customer Services depended on the particular case, the Member's division or the Member's roles, e.g. whether they were a Cabinet Member or on a Select Committee.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

17. Based on the Task Group's work, recommendations are:
  - a) **Changing the manner in which the Council conducts budget consultation with residents.** It is, however, recognised that responsibility for consultations does not fall under the remit of Customer Services.

Potential changes include:

- Using a multiple-choice format;

- Providing residents with detail and information so their response to a consultation is more informed
- Using an approach that is deliberative in nature so that residents can give reasoning and opinion that can add context to their responses  
Clearly differentiating between statutory and non-statutory services; and
- As appropriate, employing an approach that will engage with a wide section of residents as is practical and not just those who are interested in its outcome

b) **Distinguishing between open ended (all options open) and closed consultations for other consultations undertaken by the Council.** There was a need to:

- Ensure each consultation is clear about its aims and objectives and that respondents understand what can (and can't) be influenced by completing it Use a combination of two types of consultations which includes quantitative questions (e.g. multiple-choice format) and qualitative (e.g. open ended questions), providing relevant background information in an accessible format to inform respondents and set the scene; and Organise an ad-hoc private meeting of Members or to use relevant select committees for pre-scrutiny of public consultation, using expert advice to look at how consultation questions are formulated, types of questions asked and whether questions are pertinent and open-ended where appropriate, before they are put to residents, partners and stakeholders.

c) **Consolidating training on Customer Services offered to Members** by Democratic Services, including training on the uses of the Members' enquiry inbox while continuing with the current training provided to Members.

d) **Undertaking deep-dive benchmarking in Customer Services beyond the work of the Task Group and existing benchmarking exercises** in collaboration with a statistically similar Local Authority, such as Hertfordshire.

e) **Maximise the use of existing feedback mechanisms operated by Customer Services** to actively demonstrate to residents that the Council takes their opinions on board.

f) **Ensuring that digital avenues** (for example, using YouTube videos to explain reporting procedures; Members using the Members' enquiries email address) are publicised and utilised in Customer Services wherever possible.

- g) **Ensuring sufficient publicity and awareness amongst residents** about the Customer Services pathways to access, and actively signposting residents to these.
- h) **Organising visits to the Contact Centre for all Members, as part of the induction process after the May elections.**
- i) **Scrutinising the Customer Experience during the Covid-19 pandemic** and the social transformation that it has effected.
- j) **Assessing the desirability of a further review in two years** in the light of advances in digital technology, the implementation of new services such as the Learners' Single Point of Access, progress with the Customer Experience Transformation Programme and to keep up with best practice.

## Recommendations

- 18. Final recommendations of the Task Group, based on the emergent themes, have been considered and agreed at its meeting on 25 November 2020.

## Next steps

- 19. The Task Group concludes its work due to the limitations placed upon it by the Covid-19 pandemic. This final report will be presented to the Resources and Performance Select Committee at its 21 January 2021 meeting, and then reported to the Cabinet on 23 February 2021.

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## Councillor Nick Harrison

Chairman of Customer Experience Task Group | Chairman of Resources and Performance Select Committee

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## Sources/background papers

Minutes and background papers of all meetings of the Customer Experience Task Group can be found on the Council's website: [Customer Experience Task Group papers](#). Members' Survey, below, as Annex 1

## **Annex 1:**

### Customer Experience Task Group: Members' Survey

#### **Background information**

1. A link to the survey was sent to all Members on 12 February 2020. Members were reminded about the survey and the link resent a month later, on 12 March.
2. Moreover, a number of paper copies were handed out to Members on 24 February at an all-Member seminar. The results from these paper copies were then input to the digital form, so the digital results represent all responses received.
3. The survey has received 26 responses overall and is still available online for Members to complete should they wish.
4. The survey was anonymous, but respondents were given the option to enter their name at the end of the survey.

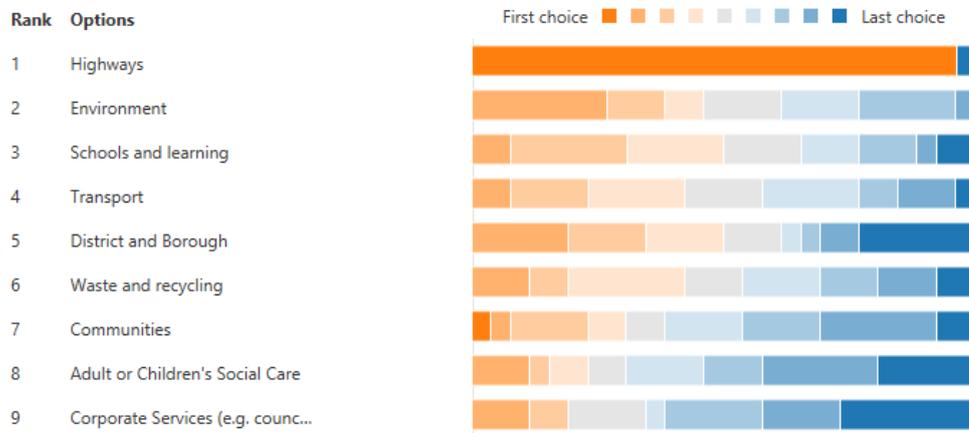
#### **Key findings**

5. Highways stands out clearly as by far the most common customer services topic for respondents. 25 of the 26 respondents rated highways number one out of the 'most common issues residents contact you directly with for resolution', and 21 of the 26 rated highways the number one issue that 'requires the greatest amount of your time and/or attention'.

**Figure 1**

What are the most common issues residents contact you directly with for resolution?

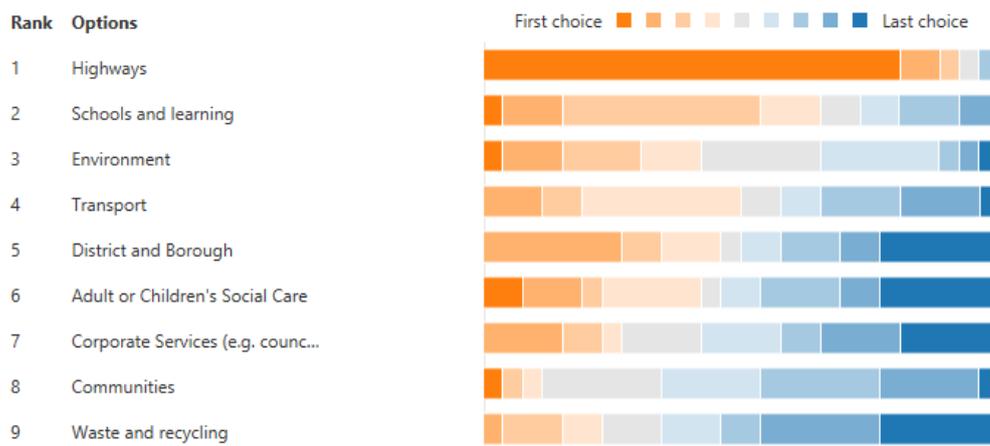
[More Details](#)



**Figure 2**

Which of these requires the greatest amount of your time and/or attention?

[More Details](#)

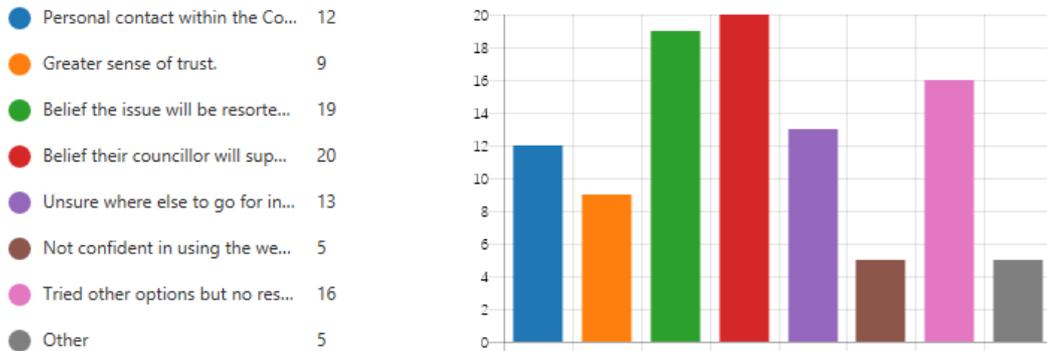


- For the questions in figures 1 and 2, environment, schools and learning, transport and districts and boroughs were the next most common and time-consuming topics after highways.
- Respondents responded that the reasons that residents contacted them directly rather than going to the Council's Customer Services or website were primarily 'belief their councillor will support their cause fully' and 'belief the issue will be resorted [sic] more quickly'.

### Figure 3

Why do you think residents contact you rather than going to the Council's Customer Services or the website?

[More Details](#)

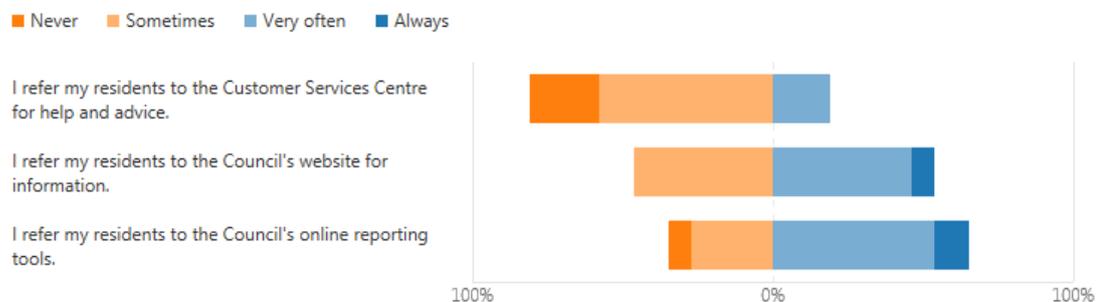


8. Respondents were less likely to refer residents to the Customer Services Contact Centre and more likely to refer residents to the Council's online reporting tools.

### Figure 4

Please rate how often you do the following statements.

[More Details](#)



9. Respondents expressed fairly high confidence levels in referring residents to all three of the information resources mentioned in figure 4.
10. In qualitative answers to the question 'why did you choose that confidence rating?' respondents' reasons to be confident included the greater efficiency of going through online/Customer Services routes, belief in the efficacy of the Council's Customer Services, and that residents could take responsibility when going through the online/Customer Services route.
11. Reasons to be less confident, meanwhile, included personal experience of poor service, lack of feedback when referring residents through those routes,

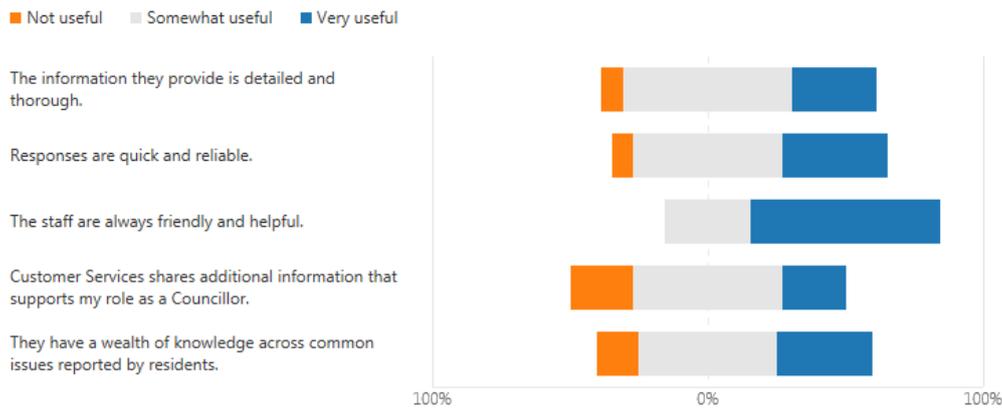
and a desire to provide personal assurance and not 'cop out' by referring a resident on elsewhere.

12. One respondent noted that whether or not they refer a resident depends on the nature of the enquiry.

### Figure 5

What aspect of Customer Services do you find useful?

[More Details](#)



13. Figure 5 shows that respondents found Customer Services staff friendly and helpful and responses quick and reliable. However, some respondents thought that Customer Services either did not share additional information to support their role as a councillor, or that if this information was shared, it was not useful (this is unclear due to the nature of the question in figure 5).

14. There was a wide variety of responses to the question of 'what information could Customer Services share with you in your role as a Councillor that would further support you and your residents?' All responses are shown below. It is clear from these responses that while a significant proportion of respondents are satisfied with the information Customer Services already provides, many respondents have more specific suggestions for what information could be provided. Amongst the information already shared with councillors, some respondents noted that the highways-related information was useful.

## Figure 6

They could advise us how many reports they have on issues we have raised

Future plans of the council

Put one thru to person requested

More divisional highways information

Resolution of issues reported in my Division

Clearer information on roles and lines of responsibility

An update when an enquiry has gone past time as to what progress has been made

Again, I do not understand what I am being asked. Officers within services should share any information which affects my Division and/or which could be raise issues (good or not so good) amongst residents. Officers in services should also share new initiatives or independent reports etc. that affects SCC' service users. But I am not sure where Customer Services role is in all that.

If the stats were easy to collate it would be interesting to see what type of contacts my residents were making with Customer Services, so I am aware of the issues

Who from my division is contacting them and for what purposes - a weekly or monthly report would be helpful

Good to be able to track progress but not always useful in resolving complex issues.

Customer Services should follow up random enquiries and build knowledge from experience.

A date when something will be resolved. Too many issues are open-ended.

Progress updates on issues

n/a

n/a

Information shared seems to be relevant - my responsibility to get other info that I might need

Satisfactory conclusions to problems raised.

Most of the questions are on highways so updates would be great

I don't understand the question.....if I need to know something I ask, how can I know what else I need in the way of information if I don't know what there is available!

Unsure.

None regularly. I think a system that ensures I get the information I need when I request it is good enough.

put me in touch with the responsible officer

Depends on the particular case

Info about what queries they get from residents and how we might help Customer Services

We get a lot of notifications. Highlighting of deadlines and categorizing the relative importance would be useful

## Figure 7

It would be helpful to develop customer experience panels in divisions

I use Customer Services on a constant basis, mainly through the dedicated councillors' email. I note that Sian Humphreys and Farrah Orr pick up most of these and their initial swift responses ("got your message"!) and understanding of the nature of the issue and follow-up when the promised action has not happened is excellent. I also use the councillors telephone

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line for issues where I need a quick response or when a discussion is required to confirm it is a SCC responsibility. My recent telephone conversations with Louise and Rashid (apologies I don't know their second names) have been excellent.

I sometimes have to send in a chaser email or telephone when a promised response has not been received by the promised date. In all cases the customer services agent has ensured a swift response from the relevant team.

In short Customer Services help me to do a good job for my residents and enable me to be an effective councillor. They need to know that, and I aim to convey that when I get the opportunity. OK, so I don't report on-line not least because my experience of that has been negative and I have no guarantee timely action will result.

Finally, just to clarify, the high level of Borough enquiries I receive is because I am also a Borough Councillor.

I have noticed that the title of the email usually gets lost so all the information in the title line must be repeated in the text - I think this is an IT issue

Overall, they are helpful and quick

Female input!

I find these questions ambiguous.

Question 2 for example- answers depend on which Scrutiny Committee one is on or responsibilities within the community that you are known for and therefore contacted about by residents. For example, being a school governor or a trustee of a charity etc. This question is going to mean different things to different councillors.

I don't think most Members understand what exactly the role of Customer Services in terms of assisting/supporting/providing information to Members is as opposed to the public/residents in general. Should CS do more than fast-tracking queries sent to the Councillors' email address, which seem to be the case at the moment? It is ultimately up to Members to decide what else would assist them with their job.

The service used to excellent but found the responses became more vague so used the service less

I think at the moment I regard Customer Services as a bit of a letter box for Highways queries. I think a bulletin every couple of months would help. Perhaps a short advice pack for members.

I had difficulty in answering Q. 8 - it somewhat missed the point.

Consultations should be better publicised to our residents

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15. As shown in figure 7, in response to the request to 'add anything you feel relevant to the work of this task and finish group, such as your experience of and expectations around Customer Services, if you would like to', some respondents emphasised the helpfulness of the Customer Services staff. Some said that it would be useful for Members to receive more information on what Customer Services does, while others highlighted the need for resident consultation/panels. All responses can be seen above.