

CUSTOMER SERVICES UPDATE

Purpose of report: To provide an update on the Council's Customer Services operation following recommendations made by the Customer Experience Task Group.

Introduction:

1. A 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 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 were also published on the Council's website to encourage public engagement.
3. Due to the pandemic, the Customer Services team was 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. The pandemic also disrupted activities planned as part of the review.
4. As a result, the work of the Task Group was concluded in January 2021. The Group made several recommendations to support the ongoing development of the Council's Customer Services offer, which are set out in paragraph 29 of this report. It was agreed an update would be given to a future meeting of the Resources and Performance Select Committee following the recommendations made by the Task Group, plus any new relevant information.

Customer Services Function and Purpose

5. The purpose of Customer Services is to provide a consistent, high quality, resident focused experience, and to champion and support the delivery of this throughout the organisation.
6. Operationally, Customer Services is the first point of contact for most Council services, including Adults & Children's Social Care. Last year the service dealt with approx. 250,000 calls, 90,000 emails, 16,000 Blue Badge applications, 18,000 Twitter mentions (via our Customer Services account) and 1,800 customer complaints; in addition to 7 million web visits and over 10,000 live web chats. The average customer satisfaction level is 94 per cent.
7. Customer Services is made up of the contact centre (split into social care and all other services), Web & Digital Services, Customer Relations, Blue Badge, and a training function.
8. Customer Services also supports the Member enquiry process, with its dedicated email address and telephone number for Councillors. The team helps coordinate responses for Members who have received enquiries from residents and will track enquiries to ensure responses are received within the target of 5 working days. Complex enquiries may, however, take longer.
9. There is also a 24/7 service for road emergencies in Surrey. Between 9am to 5pm, calls will be answered by the contact centre. Outside of these hours callers will be transferred to the emergency team, a service provided by the Council's Highways contractor. They will attend any emergencies and make the area safe within two hours.
10. Alongside the day-to-day operation, there is also a cross organisation Customer Experience Transformation Programme with the purpose of 'making people's experience of dealing with the Council quicker, easier, and better; shaping a new relationship with customers, managing their enquiries in a more efficient, proactive and connected way, and increasing the use of digital self-serve technologies'.
11. The aim of the programme is to provide customers with a more joined up, value added experience and to improve the digital customer experience, so it is the preferred choice for those able to self-serve where they can. This in turn frees up capacity across the organisation to support residents in most need, and to make sure no one is left behind.
12. The current budget of the Customer Services function is approx. £2.7 million. The service successfully achieved efficiencies of £200,000 last year, which is reflected in the current budget.
13. In terms of general performance, digital uptake across key high-volume transactions is comparable and, in some cases, outperforms other large

counties (ranging from 54 per cent to 95 per cent). Customer satisfaction and first-time resolution rates remain consistently high and above target (average of 94 per cent and 82 per cent respectively). Call waiting times have increased at points over the past two years due to the growing complexity of enquiry types and surges in Covid cases. Current call waiting time has been reduced to approximately 47 seconds.

Evolving the service to respond to the pandemic and changing needs

14. There have been significant developments to the service since the review was undertaken and the work of the Task Group concluded. This includes evolving the service offer to improve the experience for customers and taking on new services to support wider organisational improvement and to meet changing customer needs.
15. Customer Services played a major role in the Council's response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, setting up the Community Helpline in a matter of days so that residents in need could connect with the support they needed for essential tasks, such as shopping and medication collection. During the height of the pandemic, the Helpline dealt with over 16,500 enquiries from residents needing help. There were also 674,254 visits to the digital support available on the Covid-19 pages of the Council's website.
16. The Customer Services team also worked in partnership with Public Health to enable Surrey to be an early adopter of local contact tracing. The Local Tracing Partnership team was set up within Customer Services and its role was to contact residents who had tested positive for Covid-19 to help reduce the spread of the virus within Surrey. In the last year of operation, the team made over 57,000 calls with an average 76 per cent success rate.
17. Alongside the pandemic response, the service also continued to support the wider organisation by delivering new services, such as the Learners' Single Point of Access (L-SPA), taking initial contacts from families of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Over 15,000 calls have been taken so far, with 47 per cent dealt with at first point of contact, freeing up valuable time for caseworkers to focus on providing support children and young people.
18. Following the Government's announcement to lift all remaining Covid-19 restrictions on 24 February 2022, Customer Services turned its attention to using the capabilities it had developed operating the Community Helpline to support residents through the growing cost of living crisis, as well as Ukrainian refugees arriving in Surrey.

19. On 6 April 2022, Customer Services launched a new telephone and digital welfare information and advice service for residents who are struggling and need financial, welfare or wellbeing support. This supports the Council's guiding principle of no one left behind and complements other support available e.g., through Citizen's Advice.
20. This new service represents a big step towards realising the ambition to provide a more holistic type of early advice and support for customers who may have a number of different needs. Alongside providing the direct service, Customer Services staff also received training in a range of welfare and benefits advice so they can identify customers who might benefit from this service, even if they are contacting the Council about another issue.
21. Working alongside colleagues from the Communications Team, insight from customer contact through the Community Helpline is helping inform wider advice, information, and communications to residents; for example, related to the rising cost of living and fuel poverty.

New services and new ways of working to improve the customer experience

22. Since the Task Group concluded, the service has successfully delivered several initiatives to help improve the digital customer experience, drive improved ways of working and to engage with residents in a more proactive way. These include:
 - a) Implementing live chat across the Council's website, including for Adult Social Care and the Online Financial Assessment Process. This means customers can chat online with an agent, allowing those choosing to use the digital space to get real time help that enables them to complete their task online. There is an average of approx. 200 live chats a week.
 - b) Working jointly with the Digital Programme to successfully launch 'chatbot' prototypes for Schools Admissions and Death Registrations – developing automated capabilities to help people navigate the information and services on the Council's website more easily. The School Admissions chatbot won a national award and has a 95 per cent satisfaction rate, and the Death Registration prototype offers customers the facility to amend, change or cancel registration bookings online for the first time. A further two chatbot prototypes are currently in development; one for Adult Learning and one for Adult Social Care online financial assessments.
 - c) Optimising use of Gov.Notify to send automated text messages to customers – a trial with the Adult Social Care Financial Assessment Team led to over 200 online financial assessments being completed as a direct result of text reminders (a 30 per cent action rate) and saw a reduction in assessment

completion times from 16 days to 5 days due to alerts being sent. Messages were endorsed by external partners to ensure they were accessible and had the right tone and content. The positive impact has meant staff have had to make fewer follow up calls to customers to ask for information, meaning they can process applications quicker. SMS notifications are now being rolled out in other service areas where there is a need for proactive contact with residents, such as Home to School Travel Assistance.

- d) As part of wider website improvement work, and in response to customer feedback, the landing page for adult social care services was redesigned, making content more accessible and easier to navigate based on people's experiences. Helping people to find the information they need when they need it.
 - e) Development of an accessibility machine – the Council is required to comply with digital accessibility legislation, and so the service has developed an innovative automated tool to help check accessibility compliance for documents on the Council's website.
 - f) Customer Services has embarked on an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I) awareness programme to ensure the needs of staff and residents with protected characteristics are properly understood. A guide to inclusive language, with supported training for Customer Services teams, has been produced and is being shared with the wider organisation. The service intends to develop its ED&I offer further and will review how it can be included as part of its wider Customer Services training offer, which also includes training and support for Members.
23. Digital development work is ongoing and is very much based on direct customer feedback, along with wider research indicating customer preferences and needs in terms of being able to access services, advice, and information.
24. Recognising that not everyone can or wishes to use digital services, Customer services continues to offer a telephone service for people that need more personalised support. There is also work ongoing with the Libraries Service to provide an improved customer experience for residents visiting their local libraries. By the two services working more closely together, the aim is to promote early engagement and help within local communities and to provide a more joined up and holistic customer experience, making the most of the face-to-face contacts happening in local libraries. This includes connecting people to the digital support available.
25. In August 2021, Customer Services moved to a new location at Dakota House, Brooklands, Weybridge and has since implemented a new agile operating model, creating flexibility for staff whilst also maintaining the training and service

benefits of a modern, collaborative workspace. While Covid restrictions were in place, the service's ability to implement its agile model was limited. As from June 2022, contact centre teams are spending 40 per cent of their working week in the office. This is currently working well but will be kept under review to ensure the best balance between delivering an efficient and effective service, and flexibility for staff. The service does experience ongoing challenges in retaining skilled staff, so it is important to ensure the operating model provides the best opportunities for recruitment and retention of staff within the service.

Awards and inspections

26. Customer Services was delighted to be selected as finalists for two prestigious awards in 2021: The Institute of Customer Services (ICS) UK Satisfaction Awards, and the Team of the Year category at the LGC Awards.
27. Following the recent Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) inspection of the Council's Children's Services, when talking about the Request for Support team (the first point of contact for Children's Services within the contact centre), the report said: 'The children's single point of access service responds effectively to most contacts and referrals, ensuring that the vast majority of children are signposted for support and information, or have their needs assessed more fully.'

Task Group Recommendations

28. The Task Group made a number of recommendations for Customer Services to consider. Two related to how the Council conducts consultations, and it was recognised that this did not fall under the remit of Customer Services. Therefore, a response to these specific recommendations has not been included within this report. However, it should be noted that the service is working with the Resident Insight Team to ensure that the redesign of the Resident's Survey includes questions to help measure customer satisfaction with the Council.
29. The following is an update on action taken by the service in response to the Task Group recommendations:

29.1 Consolidate training on customer services offered to members:

Customer Services held briefings for members in June 2021 following the May elections, along with supporting materials such as the Member casework guide (available on the Member Portal) and is currently in the process of developing a refreshed Customer Services training offer for Members and staff.

29.2 Undertake deep dive benchmarking beyond the work of the Task Group and existing benchmarking exercises: The Surrey County Council (SCC) Customer Services team established a benchmarking and networking group for the South-East region, which is now meeting regularly to share best practice, hold deep dives on topics of interest, share learning and operational benchmarking information. This group includes statistically similar councils, such as Hertfordshire County Council, as well as additional local authorities, from different parts of the UK, who have since expressed an interest in joining.

29.3 Maximise use of existing feedback mechanisms: Customer Services continues to use customer feedback gathered through surveys, such as the Service Tick verbatim post-telephone call survey, and complaints procedure to inform service improvements, as well as share customer experiences to drive positive changes to service delivery. The service is currently examining how it can expand its work in this area and establish a more consistent way to measure customer satisfaction across the organisation.

29.4 Ensure that digital avenues (e.g., videos) are publicised and utilised in Customer Services wherever possible: The service is continuing to develop ways to promote its digital services to make them as easy as possible to access and use. For example, a video was created to accompany the launch of the welfare offer in order to reach more residents, and QR codes are being used in libraries so people can directly access online services by scanning the code on their mobile devices. Videos are also beginning to feature more prominently on the Council's website to explain procedures.

29.5 Ensure sufficient publicity and awareness amongst residents about Customer Services pathways to services: In addition to the videos referenced in paragraph 29.4, Customer Services is also working with colleagues within the Communications team to promote new and existing services and raise awareness amongst residents; for example, leaflets have been produced publicising the welfare offer and these are being displayed in key locations such as food banks, as well as being sent to targeted resident groups / organisations. Targeted messaging is also delivered via social media channels. For example, the Customer Services Twitter channel regularly publicises online reporting options e.g., how to report a faulty streetlight.

29.6. Organise visits to the Contact Centre for all Members, as part of the induction process after the May elections: Customer Services has hosted a number of 'open house' visits for members and officers to observe how the service works, what customers contact the Council about, and the experience residents have when they telephone or use the website. These visits have been well received and it is recommended that Members arrange to visit the service if they haven't already. Times and dates can be arranged to accommodate Members.

29.7 Scrutinise the Customer Experience during the Covid-19 pandemic:

The Council has commissioned a range of different research to better understand the needs and experiences of residents and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This included a Community Impact Assessment, and ethnographic research into the experiences of lesser heard groups / under-represented people. The findings of such research have helped informed the approach of Customer Services. For example, research into the experience of people wanting to access adult social care services showed that live web chat was a popular option, so the service rolled out this capability across the Adult Social Care section of the Council's website. It has also identified areas for further improvement, such as some people commenting their experience of contacting the Council doesn't feel as customer centric as other organisations, the experience can feel unproductive from a customer perspective, and that contact options need to feel more inclusive.

Conclusions:

30. The Customer Services offer has evolved over the past year, both in response to the pandemic but also the changing needs of Surrey residents. This has resulted in the successful delivery of new services and ways of working, with significant progress being made in the development of digital capabilities to improve the customer experience.
31. Focus over the next 12 months includes:
 - Developing and evolving the welfare information & advice offer to incorporate more services and respond to changing demand
 - Develop a roadmap for the future development of the website
 - Continue to work in partnership with key customer facing service areas to deliver better customer experiences and create efficiencies e.g., Adults Social Care (ASC), Environment, Transport & Infrastructure (ETI), Home to School Transport
 - Establish best practice around use of customer interaction technologies e.g., live chat, chatbots, online forms, SMS notifications
 - Improve organisational capability to manage customer interactions and relationships more effectively and create the conditions for more partnership working opportunities
 - Design and deliver a refreshed Customer Services training offer, including for Members

Recommendations:

32. That the Resources and Performance Select Committee note the report and actions taken in response to the Task Group recommendations.

Next steps:

33. To provide a further update to the Committee on future improvements and developments, as and when requested.

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Sources/background papers

Customer Experience Task Group Report 21 January 2021

Customer Experience Transformation Programme

Customer Services Operational data

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