

Overview and Scrutiny Report

Ward(s) affected: All

Report of Director of Community Wellbeing

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Date: 13 September 2022

Customer Services: Performance and Progress update

Executive Summary

The Overview and Scrutiny committee requested an update on the performance and progression of Customer Services. This report provides an overview of this and invites comments.

Recommendation to Committee

That the Committee be invited to comment on this report

Reason(s) for Recommendation:

The committee has asked to review the performance and progression of customer services improvement as part of its work programme.

Is the report (or part of it) exempt from publication?

No

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The report provides an update on the performance and progression of customer services at Guildford Borough Council since the implementation of Future Guildford.

2. Strategic Priorities

- 2.1 Customer services is at the heart of what we do at Guildford Borough Council, acting as the front door to the Council for our residents.
- 2.2 Customer services contributes to the Council's values of listening to the views of our residents and delivering excellent customer service.

3. Background

- 3.1 As part of the Future Guildford programme, the customer service team increased its remit significantly. The team became the front door for all enquiries into the Council, bringing together areas that were previously within the services themselves, increasing the knowledge and skills required to do the role. At full capacity the team is 21 FTE, however with ongoing vacancies we usually run at an average of 17-18 FTE.
- 3.2 Recruitment issues mean that we have struggled to reach the number of customer service advisors required to take on this new service. This was coupled with a significant training requirement, organisational changes in other areas that increased customer contact and new systems and processes in place at the same time which meant that the service offered to our residents did not meet the standards that our customers expect and deserve. There were also changes of management within the service that created further disruption.
- 3.3 Since January 2022 an action plan has been in place to improve our customer services offering both digitally and on the phone. This report provides an update on the progress of this and the current performance of the service.

4. Our strategy and target operating model

- 4.1 Our customer engagement strategy, corporate customer charter and target operating model set out our goals and shape how we approach customer service at the Council.
- 4.2 The strategy also sets out our target operating model of customer contact – 75% of customer transactions undertaken online, 20% via the telephone and 5% face to face.
- 4.3 Our corporate customer charter sets out our promise to our customers and our target response times for customer contact. The charter is published on the external website [Corporate Customer Charter - Guildford Borough Council](#)

5. Customer and Digital improvement Tactical Plan

- 5.1 In January 2022, a tactical action plan was put in place to drive improvements to our customer service across the Council.

- 5.2 The plan is based around five key themes: engage and collaborate, digital first, policies and strategies, improving our service, and working with councillors.
- 5.3 One of the key areas of focus has been on improving our response rate to both telephone calls and online cases for customers. At the beginning of the year we know that there were unacceptably long waits for customers to receive responses either to online queries or whilst on the phone. We have taken a range of steps to improve this.
- 5.4 We took the decision to reduce our phone operating hours by one hour in April 2022. This was not a decision that was taken lightly but was done to allow us to be able to cross train staff so that we could add more resilience to phone lines and online queries by having more staff trained to answer a range of queries and to allow us to be able to assign staff to enquiry lines with the highest volume as required.
- 5.5 Having more online contact from customers does mean that we have to change the way we operate and dedicate time to responding to online cases in the same way that we would to other forms of customer contact. The reduced phone hours has allowed the team the time to manage online contact and respond to customers within 2 working days, often faster, in many cases removing the need for customers to follow up with phone calls.
- 5.6 The reduced call time was implemented in our quietest time of customer contact and we have received no feedback that this is a detriment to customers but we will continue to monitor feedback. The statistics show that we are receiving similar average call numbers even with reduced opening times and an out of hours service is available for customers if needed. However the changes we have been able to make by reducing the phone hours has had a positive impact on our average call wait times and responses to online cases.
- 5.7 The changes we have made have meant the average wait time on the phone has reduced and online enquires average response time has increased to contact being made in general within 2 working days. More detailed statistics are available in Appendix 1. There are still improvements that we can make and will strive to do so but we are confident that the changes we have made will help us to do that.
- 5.8 In January 2022, we also implemented a call back function that allows residents to request a call back rather than wait on hold. Since going live the team have made over 3000 call backs, the majority within 24 hours of the original call, and feedback from customers has been extremely positive. We are looking to further develop this service by reducing the amount of time a customer is on hold prior to the call back option being offered.
- 5.9 We fully acknowledge that customer service at the Council is not just the customer service team, but all teams and functions within the council have a role to play. To help support this we have been working closely with service leads and all services to improve training, improve the sharing of information and in some cases staff have been “loaned” to the programme from other departments to help

make improvements to the customer experience in those areas, particularly waste and recycling.

6. Our Digital Offering and Customer Engagement

- 6.1 Our digital offering is crucial to supporting those customers who are digitally enabled to be able to access our information and support 24/7, at a time that is most convenient to them. Over the past 8 months we have been working to improve and refine our customers digital journeys.
- 6.2 MyGuildford is our online customer portal that allows customers to log and track customer requests, pay for services and link their council tax and benefits information so that it can be viewed in one place. Our initial target was to have 10,000 customers signed up to MyGuildford accounts in the first year. As of the 31 July 2022 there are 43,416 customers registered for a MyGuildford account which equates to 85% of customers who have contacted us.
- 6.3 It is important that our digital offering is fit for purpose so to ensure this we have been undertaking customer insight testing of our current digital offering. This has been in person at Guildford library and online via testing on our website. Customers were asked to undertake real life scenarios and show how they would find information on our website. Ninety residents attended the library user testing and a further 310 people undertook the online testing. This has given us an insight on how customers navigate and search the website providing us with crucial information to help improve customers digital journeys.
- 6.4 Other improvements to the website and customers digital journeys has included improving the search terms on the website to increase the click through rate to the right result first time, speech to text options, improved customer contact forms including knowledge based articles to help customers find the answers to their queries more quickly.
- 6.5 Further details on improvements made as part of the tactical plan can be found in Appendix 2.

7. Future Actions

- 7.1 We know that there is still more to do and further improvements we can make to improve the service we offer our customers. We will continue to strive for improvements and work with customers and councillors to ensure that what we are doing meets the needs of our residents.
- 7.2 Alongside service improvements many of our customer policies and strategies are approaching their renewal dates. We will be looking to develop these over the coming months to ensure our strategies and policies support our residents' needs and our operational delivery.

8. Consultations

- 8.1 The Lead Councillor responsible for Customer Services has been consulted on this report and approved its submission to the Committee.

9. Key Risks

- 9.1 Much of our current strategy and operational delivery is based on achieving a channel shift of customer contact towards our online services for those residents who are digitally enabled to do so. Without this there is a risk that customer service agents on the telephones will not be able to support the number of calls received or our residents who are not able to access support online.
- 9.2 The shift to online and social media customer contact over the past few years has significantly changed how customers interact with organisations and this applies to councils as well. If we continue to embrace the latest technologies, provide a reliable service through online contact and continue to actively seek customer feedback on our digital platforms to ensure they are fit for purpose then we should be able to achieve this channel shift.

10. Financial Implications

- 10.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

11. Legal Implications

- 11.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

12. Human Resource Implications

- 12.1 There are no human resources implications from this report.

13. Equality and Diversity Implications

- 13.1 There are no equality and diversity implications arising from this report. Any future changes to the service will have regard to the aims of the Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010) and may be subject to an equalities impact assessment.

14. Climate Change/Sustainability Implications

- 14.1 There are no climate change or sustainability implications arising from this report.

15. Suggested issues for overview and scrutiny

- 15.1 As requested as part of its work programme, this report gives the Committee the opportunity to comment on the progress and performance of customer service.

16. Summary of Options

- 16.1 None.

17. Conclusion

- 17.1 There have been significant changes at Guildford Borough Council that whilst embedding, had a negative impact on the service that we offered our customers and residents and we fell short of what was expected and deserved.
- 17.2 Significant changes have been made to our customer and digital services over the past 8 months and we are starting to see improvements in customer telephone wait times and uptake of our digital services.
- 17.3 We are not perfect and there is still more we can do to improve and we will continually strive to improve our performance ensuring that our residents are at the heart of everything we do, but we now have a much stronger foundation to build on as we move forward.

18. Background Papers

None

19. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Call and online customer contact statistics
Appendix 2 – Customer and Digital improvement plan