

Guildford Borough Council

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny

Date: 11th July 2023

Ward(s) affected: All

Report of Director: Community Wellbeing

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Report Status: Open

Customer Services: Performance and Progress update

1. Executive Summary

The Overview and Scrutiny committee requested an update on the performance and progression of Customer Services since the previous update in October 2022. This report provides an overview of this and invites comments.

2. Recommendation to Committee

That the Committee note and comment on this report.

3. Reason(s) for Recommendation:

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

4. Exemption from publication

4.1 No

5. Purpose of Report

5.1. The report provides an update on the performance and progression of customer services at Guildford Borough Council since the implementation of the improvement plan.

6. Strategic Priorities

6.1. 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

6.2. Customer services contributes to the councils' values of listening to the views of our residents and delivering excellent customer service.

7. Background

7.1 The Customer service team, supported by the digital offering, are the front door for all enquiries into the council, bringing together areas that were previously within the services themselves. This was a large organisational change and, unfortunately, this initially led to a drop in customer service performance whilst this change embedded.

7.2 Since January 2022 an action plan has been in place to improve our customer services offering both digitally and on the phone. Significant changes have been made to both services to improve customer experience when engaging with the council.

7.3 This report provides an update on the progress of this and the current performance of the service.

7.4 Our strategy and target operating model

- 7.4.1 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.
- 7.4.2 The strategy also sets out our target operating model of customer contact which is 75% of customer transactions undertaken online, 20% via the telephone and 5% face to face
- 7.4.3 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](#))

7.5 Customer and Digital Channel shift

- 7.5.1 Online and digital engagement with customers is crucial to allowing our residents to find the information they need at the time that is most convenient to them.
- 7.5.2 Both our website and online portal, MyGuildford, help to support this by acting as the first point of contact for residents to find the information they need the first time without the need to speak to us.
- 7.5.3 Having a strong digital presence does not mean that we are removing other ways for customers to contact us. We fully acknowledge that we need to provide a service for all residents including those who are not digitally able to engage with us through these routes.
- 7.5.4 However, in order to be able to support those residents who are not digitally enabled, we need those that can, to use the online services available.
- 7.5.5 Online contact through all means is just as important to us and our residents as contact via the phones and we have adapted our working practices to ensure that we are responding to our resident's digital contact as well as phone contact in a timely way. This has been through dedicated time being

given to customer services staff to concentrate on online contact away from the phone systems and a change to phone operating times to support this.

7.5.6 It is crucial that we do treat online customer contact with the same importance as other routes such as via the telephone, as delays in replying to online contact will result in residents calling to chase requests which blocks phone lines for residents who are not digitally enabled, or who require extra support from being able to get through to speak to an agent.

7.6 MyGuildford and customer journeys

7.6.1. 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.

7.6.2 As of 5th June 2023 there are over 57,000 customers registered to use the MyGuildford portal which represents 83.9% of the customers who contact us.

7.6.3 We regularly review customer feedback and make improvements to the digital experience of our customers

7.6.4 Based on customer feedback we made improvements to the garden waste renewal process for this year which included rewriting the renewal email that a customer received to include a direct link to the form a resident needed and rewriting the confirmation emails to explain what to expect and what the next steps were.

7.6.5 We are also continually improving the contact us form for customers. This has included changing the descriptions and categorisation used to make this easier for customers to navigate. We are also shortly due to go live with a knowledge base that will display information and signposting for customers based on the words they are typing into the contact form. For example if a resident types in "bins" information on how to report a missed bin, how to request a new bin etc will appear. This will allow residents to find the answers to some questions that they have without the need to contact us and will also help to sign post residents to the right information when they need it.

7.7 Website

- 7.7.1 The website is the front door into the council and often the first point of contact for many residents. It is important that the information is correct and our residents can find what they are looking for without the need to contact us.
- 7.7.2 Following recent customer insight testing on our website that tracked how easily customers could find the information they were looking for, we have made improvements to the search function that has increased the number of searches that bring up results and increased the click through rate, meaning that residents are finding what they are looking for quicker.
- 7.7.3 We have implemented a “Is this page useful” and feedback box on every page of the website. This has been instrumental in helping us to see where we are getting it right, but importantly where we can make a webpage better. This also alerts us to issues very quickly, for example we knew that the payment system had gone down prior to internal colleagues being aware through feedback on the website. This allows us to act quicker and get key messaging and fixes completed much faster.

7.8 Accessibility and our customers

- 7.8.1 Last year we worked with a company, WebUsability, to audit our website and digital platforms for accessibility. We have now been signed off as being fully compliant with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1.
- 7.8.2 To take this a step further we conducted user testing to make sure everyone could access our site. Groups of volunteers from the community took part in the project and participants were invited to test our website using assistive technology.

They checked to see if they could:

- navigate through our site easily,
- find out information they needed to know,
- access links and external platforms,

- read documents on our site,
- find out about images and videos

7.8.3 We had a 70% success rate of users who were able to use our site with ease. The feedback we received from the 30% who could not, is being actioned to improve our services for all.

7.8.4 The programme of testing was vital to ensure that people with additional needs can fully connect with us. We are continuously looking to improve and will continue to hold these kinds of focus groups, so that our customers are at the heart of everything we do.

7.9 Social Media and customer engagement

7.9.1 Over the past six months we have changed our approach to engaging with customers on social media, taking a more proactive approach to how we respond to messages.

7.9.2 These steps have included:

- responding to comments on social media
- producing much more of our own customer focused content
- working closer with customer services to align messaging across the customer service centre and social media
- Increased preparation for emergencies so that we can get messages to customers quickly

7.9.3 This change has been reflected in our brand sentiment. This monitors the audience opinion of us by collecting and analysing how people are talking about us on social media.

7.9.4 Data shows that the level of positive engagement had increased by 586% between 1st October 2022 – April 2023 compared to 1 October 2021 – April 2022. This shows that we are receiving much more positive sentiment from our customers and residents on social media.

7.10 Customer service centre and call wait times

- 7.10.1 Over the past few months we have taken steps to significantly improve the call wait times for our customers. This has been through a combination of recruitment and training within the team and improving the response to digital contact, removing the need for customers to call to chase enquiries and therefore reducing the level of avoidable repeat contact. We have also made changes to the functionality of the IVR (call system) that means customers have less options to navigate and those calls reach the correct staff who are able to answer the queries at first point of contact faster.
- 7.10.2 Alongside this we continue to offer the call back option for residents who would prefer not to wait on hold and receive a call back from us instead. In March this year we undertook some analysis that showed that now the phone service being offered is much more stable, the way call backs operate in the system was now negatively impacting call wait times rather than providing a positive tool for our customers. We made changes to how these operate and significant improvements can be seen in the wait times for April and May as a result. (Please see Appendix A)
- 7.10.3 Overall the changes that we have made have meant that call wait times for customers has significantly improved from January 2022 when 38% of calls were being handled to around 85-95% of calls now being taken each week. This is alongside the team also responding to online contact within advertised time frames and managing face to face contact through reception. Further information on calls can be found in Appendix A.
- 7.10.4 From the statistics we can see that there is a higher wait time for calls received on a Monday compared to the rest of the week and this does impact on the average wait time across a month. However, the wait times Tuesday to Friday are shorter.
- 7.10.5 Our analysis of which lines are busiest on a Monday shows us that the repairs line and general customer service line receive the highest volumes of calls. We will be working with services and the comms team to help divert non urgent requests to later in the week to help improve the wait times on a Monday.

7.11 Future Actions

7.11.1 Alongside ongoing service improvements many of our customer policies and strategies are approaching their renewal dates. We will be looking to refresh these strategies in line with our partnership with Waverley Borough Council to ensure that the approach we are taking meets the needs of residents in both councils.

8. Consultations

8.1. The Lead Councillor for Engagement and 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 continuing to achieve 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 social media, 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 continue with this channel shift.
- 9.3 Customer service covers all contact that a customer has with the council, not just those that are via the customer service centre. There is a risk that the level of service is not replicated across all council departments. A strong customer engagement strategy and charter that all services own, are bought into and implement on a daily basis would help to mitigate this risk.

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 arising 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.

15.2 The committee is asked to confirm if they wish for further progress reports for this area to be brought forward.

16. Summary of Options

16.1 None

17. Conclusion

17.1 We know that there is still more we can do to make improvements to 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.

18. Background Papers

18.1 None