

Report to Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

10 April 2025

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| Subject: | Corporate Contact Centre Update |
| Director: | Assistant Chief Executive James McLaughlin |
| Contact Officer: | Strategic Improvement Manager Helen Green Helen.Green@Sandwell.gov.uk |

1 Recommendations

- 1.1 To consider and comment upon the Corporate Contact Centre update.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 To provide the assurance to the Board with an overview of the Corporate Contact Centre to include – call volumes and performance; vacancy rates; customer service training; customer satisfaction; quality monitoring and an update on the implementation of the new Contact Centre telephony platform.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Council Plan?

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| Growing Up in Sandwell | The Contact Centre is instrumental in supporting all of the Council Plan objectives by providing our customers with a way to communicate with us to resolve their issues. |
| Living in Sandwell | |
| Thriving Economy in Sandwell | |
| Healthy in Sandwell | |
| One Council One Team | |

4 Context and Key Issues

Background:

- 4.1 Whilst as an organisation the Council supports customers to utilise its online services where possible, the authority still receives a huge amount of contact through the telephony route. For the FY 2023 – 24 the total contact via the telephony route accounted for 36% of all contact, compared to 55% of contact for the online channel.
- 4.2 The Corporate Contact Centre takes calls for a number of different service areas:
- Children's Services
 - Environmental
 - Customer Feedback
 - Highways, Registrars
 - Regulatory Services
 - Housing – ASB; Lettings; Rents; Repairs: Homelessness.

Since December 2022 the Housing Hub have also been involved in taking Housing calls (not including Repairs), the amount of calls taken by the Housing Hub has gradually increased to approximately 45 - 50% of these calls on average. There are separate Contact Centres for both Adult Social Care and Revenue & Benefits.

- 4.3 Due to the breadth of calls taken by the Corporate Contact Centre a full and extensive training package is provided to all staff to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills to be able to take the variety of calls received.
- 4.4 The Corporate Contact Centre has an FTE of 43.2 staff. Whilst the Contact Centre has struggled historically to recruit and retain staff this situation has improved over the last 2 years. The current vacancy rate is 2.53% however a proportion of staff are regularly redeployed into other areas of Corporate Customer, such as the One Stop Shop to cover increased demand.
- 4.5 Appendix 1 provides information on Corporate Contact Centre call volumes – split by area, this shows that approximately 50% of all calls received are in relation to Housing Repairs. This has been consistent since the Corporate Contact Centre has taken these calls, however, with the work underway in relation to the Housing Transformation programme, this is likely to improve call volumes in this area in the future.

4.6 In relation to Corporate Contact Centre performance and the Abandonment Rate (AR) this has steadily improved over the last few years:

- AR 21/22 – 17.16%
- AR 22/23 – 10.64%
- AR 23/24 – 10.34%
- AR 24/25 – 7.39% (this does not include March's figures as they were not available at the time of submitting the report)

4.7 As part of performance monitoring, quality audits are carried out with all staff in the Contact Centre. A coaching approach is undertaken with staff to identify areas of improvement and provide feedback on areas of good practice.

4.8 Due to the current outdated Avaya Contact Centre telephony solution it is not possible to collate automated customer satisfaction data as this part of the system no longer works. Advisors do ask for feedback at the end of the call, but it is acknowledged that this is not the best way to collect feedback. This issue will be resolved once the new Contact Centre telephony platform is implemented.

4.9 As part of the wider work to improve our Customer Experience we have undertaken a number of initiatives:

- Development of a bespoke Customer Service training package which has been provided by Chapelfield Associates. This training has been well received and feedback from staff has been overwhelmingly positive. The approach taken to this was for the provider to spend time with the various different service areas in order to put a package together that would meet the needs of the organisation rather than an off the shelf generic package. By the end of April 2025, 600 frontline staff will have received this training. Funding has been secured to provide this training for a further 300 frontline staff throughout the remainder of 2025.
- A set of customer service standards for all staff to follow have been developed and are being launched in April 2025. These complement the Council's Values & Behaviours and are focused on further improving our interactions with our customers.
- A Customer Experience Strategy has been developed and is currently going through the required governance arrangements, this is planned to be submitted for consideration at the Cabinet meeting in May 2025.
- A procurement exercise was undertaken to procure a new Contact Centre Telephony platform and work is well underway to implement the new system.

- The Community Hub pilot was rolled out to West Bromwich Library and Blackheath Library to ensure the Council has a face to face offer in all six Towns for those customers that still need to transact with us face to face.
- A new digital strategy is being developed.
- A housing transformation programme has been developed.

4.10 All of the work completed or underway is aimed to improve the Customer Experience and contribute to our work to become and be recognised as an outstanding Council. Whilst officers are confident in the work that has been completed, there is no complacency and there are plans in place to further transform the customer experience of the Council and its services.

Update on the new Contact Centre Telephony Platform:

4.11 The Council undertook a procurement exercise in 2023 for a new Contact Centre telephony platform. The successful supplier awarded this contract was BT with a solution provided by MITEL.

4.12 Work has been underway since this time with a High-Level Design being signed off in 2024. Since this time, a data gathering phase has been conducted for the Low-Level Design.

4.13 The third Low Level Design has been received from MITEL and the Council has provided feedback on relevant changes required. The new version of the Low-Level Design is currently awaited and can then be issued. It is anticipated that once the new version has been received, officers will then be in a position to sign off this document.

4.14 After this point, the following stages will ensue:

- Build of the system will commence.
- MITEL testing will take place.
- The system will be handed over and training for staff will be delivered.
- User Acceptance Testing will be carried out to ensure the system meets the Council's requirements.
- A go live date will be confirmed.

4.15 The new solution will provide the following improvements initially:

- A new one number for the majority of Council services.
- A new Interactive Voice Response menu for most service areas.
- The ability to gather automated customer satisfaction data.

- Customers will be able to retain their position in the queue and receive a call back for most service areas at busy times rather than having to wait on hold.

- 4.16 Once the new system has been embedded then further transformational work will be undertaken to look at introducing a WhatsApp function for more simple enquiries. Following the implementation of WhatsApp, officers will then examine options for increased automation & AI solutions.
- 4.17 The work identified above in relation to the improvements for the Customer Experience, including the implementation of the new telephony solution is all part of the Council's aspirations to ensure it provides the best possible offer to its customers.

5 Implications

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| Resources: | No specific implications arising directly from this report. |
| Legal and Governance: | |
| Risk: | |
| Equality: | |
| Health and Wellbeing: | |
| Social Value: | |
| Climate Change: | |
| Corporate Parenting: | |

6 Appendices

Appendix One – Data on Contact Centre Call Volumes.

7. Background Papers

None.