



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cabinet Scrutiny Committee 5th March 2020

Report of the Assistant Chief Executive & Chief Digital Officer Karen Jones

Matter for Information

Wards Affected: All Wards

Report Title

Customer Services – Performance.

Purpose of the Report:

This report is to provide an overview of the service provided by Customer Services, an outline of the recent performance of the service and the improvements planned for the service in the next twelve months.

Executive Summary:

Customer Services provides a focal point for customer contact and deals with in excess of 170,000 customer contacts each year.

Customer Services staff handle a wide range of enquiries handling entire transactions (end to end) or completing part of the transaction dependent upon the service model in operation.

The service comprises of:

Two One Stop Shops located at the main reception areas at Neath and Port Talbot. The One Stop Shops provide the initial point of contact for all visitors to the civic centres and field a wide range of enquiries and requests for service. The current staffing complement is seven permanent employees (full and part time staff) plus one modern apprentice.

The Contact Centre is located at the Quays along with the CCTV service. The Contact Centre is the initial point of contact for all general enquiries made to the Council's principal service number 01639 686868. The service also acts as the contact point for a range of services, through the main telephone number, emails and social media posts. It also provides cover for the out of hours function of the Council up to 7pm in the evening and from 7am-8:30am Monday to Friday. The current staffing complement is eight permanent employees (full and part time staff) plus two modern apprentices.

Staff work flexibly between the Contact Centre and the One Stop Shops with One Stop Shop staff also able to handle telephone calls when demand so requires.

Background and Analysis:

Customer Services - One Stop Shops

For the period 1/4/2019 to 31/1/2020 there were 48,484 visitors to the One Stop Shops. Reception enquiries totalled 34,455 and OSS enquiries were 14,029.

Customers are initially received at the main reception desk. Where customers wish to receive a service, rather than just information or direction, there are dedicated service desks, with interview rooms also available for members of the public who require a private discussion.

The One Stop Shops provide a wide range of services on a face to face basis:

Issues affecting the performance of the One Stop Shops in the past 12 months:

Bus Pass Renewals and Enquiries

- Until 2019, the service processed applications for bus passes at the one stop shops in one transaction. Transport for Wales determined that they would move bus pass services to a digital platform, to be managed “once for Wales”. This meant that the one stop shops would no longer provide the service - the role changing to one of advice and guidance. We are also able to offer digital assistance to those unable to use the online service without help.
- The changeover to Transport for Wales in September 2019 was poorly communicated and caused a massive increase in callers in a very short period of time. Transport for Wales’s website experienced technical problems due to the unprecedented volume of online applications. In the coming months a decision will be made by TfW /Welsh Government on whether bus passes remain with Transport for Wales or returns responsibility to NPTCBC for administering new applications/renewals.

Staffing

- Some £500,000 of staff costs have been taken out of the service since 2008. The current staff group is ageing and there is a need to address succession planning.

Four Modern Apprentices have been recruited since April 2019, complementing the existing two apprentices already in place. There is a significant induction programme for any new staff coming into the service however, while new staff are undergoing training, transaction times are generally longer whilst they learn the role, systems and procedures and there are demands placed on existing staff to provide support and assistance.

Blue Badges

- Blue Badge services operate on a “drop in” basis – there is no requirement to make an appointment. This results in times when service demand outstrips the staffing resource available. The Government has released an on-line service which is beginning to be taken up.
- On average we expect to issue between 3,000-4,500 Blue Badges per year. However, there are years where the volume of service requests can significantly exceed this due to the timing of when individual badges expire.

Blue Badge Transactions

AUTOMATIC APPLICATIONS	3,134
NEW	591
RENEWAL	2,463
REPLACEMENT	80
DISCRETIONARY APPLICATIONS	1,502
NEW	530
RENEWAL	938
REPLACEMENT	34
Total	4,636

Customer Services - Contact Centre

In 2018/19, the Contact Centre received 119,551 calls and circa 7,000 emails. From April 2019 to January 2020 the Contact Centre has received over 105,000 calls. It is expected that caller demand will exceed the previous year's total figure.

Circa 30% of the calls received are "switchboard" style enquiries, "can I speak to..." or "can I speak to someone about...". The staff have an in depth knowledge of the services operated by the council so are able to ensure that the caller has their enquiry resolved.

The Contact Centre provides a wide range of services over the telephone and by email.

In 2019, demands placed on the Call Centre saw an increase in customers in Quarter 1 & 2 as well as a corresponding increase in time spent in dealing with these customers, compared with previous years. (Appendix 1 & Appendix 2). This increase in time spent on calls and the increase in the number of calls resulted in a very high demand on the Contact Centre throughout the summer. This affected the time people were waiting to have their call answered and the number of calls abandoned by the caller.

The combination of the following events explains the pressures experienced by the Service:

Green Garden Bags –

This scheme generated an increase in calls, resulting in increased call handling time (Appendix 2). Initially, callers reported they hadn't received bags (they could see neighbours and other streets had received them). This was followed by calls about the charge being levied for replacement bags (most callers were complaining about being charged for bags, often alleging that they had not received the initial supply).

Side Waste Scheme Van Permits and Pest Control Charges

Changes were introduced limiting van permits to 12 permits in one year, compared with no limits on permits previously. Pest control charges were also increased. Changes to these policies have resulted in longer conversations being held with service users as the changes were unpopular initially. Over time, callers have become more accepting of the new changes and use permits more efficiently i.e. take fuller loads at one time. With regard to the pest control charges, people soon accepted the new fees when they realised they were either cheaper or on a par with private companies.

New Equipment

In April 2019, the Contact Centre ICT systems were upgraded as part of a major infrastructure replacement programme that has been rolled out across the Council. Initially, the introduction of the new system was not without problems and resulted in some downtime for the Contact Centre as users were set up and the correct software was added/updated. These issues were short term, and each issue was resolved satisfactorily. However it added to pressures in maintaining answer rates during a busy time.

Staffing

The four additional Modern Apprentices all began their induction training in the Contact Centre before being rotated into other aspects of the service. As for the One Stop Shops, transaction times will be longer whilst people are in training. A Senior Customer Services Officer role has been created from within the existing complement of staff – one in the One Stop Shops and one in the Contact Centre. New recruits now have a dedicated mentor and demands on other staff members have reduced accordingly. This new arrangement was introduced in Quarter 2.

Not all of the Modern Apprentices will wish to have a permanent role in the Service, consequently, there will be an ongoing need to recruit and develop staff into entry level positions within the service.

Planned Service Improvements

The Service captures detailed information about the number and type of enquiries handled. Analysis of data for 2019-20 indicating the highest volume of demand is shown in Appendix 3.

There are a number of changes to be implemented over the next 12 months to respond to:

- Changing preferences of our customers – more customers want to transact on line rather than face to face;
- Improvements in technology – there is greater scope to automate some of the more straightforward transactions through service such as chat bots, web chat and automated switchboard functions;
- Increased complexity of some customers – in common with many other services we are seeing a small but significant number of people presenting with complex needs. Freeing up staff time from more mundane tasks to concentrate resources on those that need the most help is a key objective; and
- Financial Pressures –the service needs to continue to find new sources of income or savings as part of the Council's wider budget situation. With the much reduced number of staff available, resilience is a challenge across three sites particularly at peak times.

The following actions are to be taken forward in 2020-21 to respond to the above:

One Stop Shops

Blue Badge Service	Promote take up of the on-line service (Target 900 customers)	Customer Services Manager	March 2020
	Move to an appointments only service	Customer Services Manager	April 2020
Bus Passes	Provide a digital assist service for ongoing customers	Team Leader – One Stop Shops	April 2020
	Continue to promote take up of the on-line bus pass service	Digital Inclusion Ambassador	March 2020
Food Vouchers	Notify food banks that we will no longer provide a drop in service at the one stop shops – customers will still be able to get vouchers, if eligible from the relevant service.	Team Leader - One Stop Shop	April 2020

Digital Assist	Review the physical and technical environment to introduce better use of technology to manage visitors	Customer Services Manager	July 2020
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Contact Centre

Switchboard	Introduce the automated switchboard (10-15,000 calls)	Team Leader – Contact Centre	June 2020
Further develop web-chat and chat bots	Automate routine web-based/on-line transactional services	Customer Services Manager	September 2020
Improve the handling of e mail enquiries	Mobilise the functionality of the new technology to enable better handling of e mail enquiries	Customer Services Manager	September 2020

Financial Impacts:

The measures set out above are necessary to enable the service to continue to provide an acceptable level of service at a time when demands are changing and there is an ongoing need to reduce the net cost of services.

Integrated Impact Assessment:

Older and disabled people will be most impacted by the changes to services provided by the One Stop Shop. Detailed assessments will be carried out, together with consultation where necessary prior to changes being implemented.

People unable to use the on-line services will still be able to access face to face and telephone services in line with the policy currently adopted by Members.

Valleys Communities Impacts:

For those people living in valley communities who are able to engage with on-line services, the improvements highlighted above will be beneficial as services will be accessible 24/7 from wherever they need to access the services from, removing the need for people to phone or travel to the urban centres.

For those who wish to access the on-line services but need to have support to achieve that, the Council requires the community anchor organisations funded by the Third Sector Grants Scheme to provide such digital support.

Workforce Impacts:

The measures set out above have been discussed with staff and will require continuous remodelling of roles and re-skilling. Staff are keen that these changes are implemented in the next 12 months as the current service model is placing unacceptable pressure on the reduced staff at peak times.

Legal Impacts:

No Implications.

Risk Management Impacts:

- There is a risk that without implementing the changes set out above that performance will deteriorate again in the next 12 months
- There is a risk that without implementing the changes, staff morale will deteriorate and sickness levels will increase. Staff may also choose to leave the service
- There is a risk that the Council will lose the opportunity to improve access to services if the new technologies are not deployed as set out above.

Consultation:

There will be a requirement for public consultation on some of the proposed changes to the service. This will take place before implementation. We will also be seeking customer feedback during the implementation process and on an ongoing basis so that we can adjust the service where necessary.

Recommendations:

That the committee notes the report.

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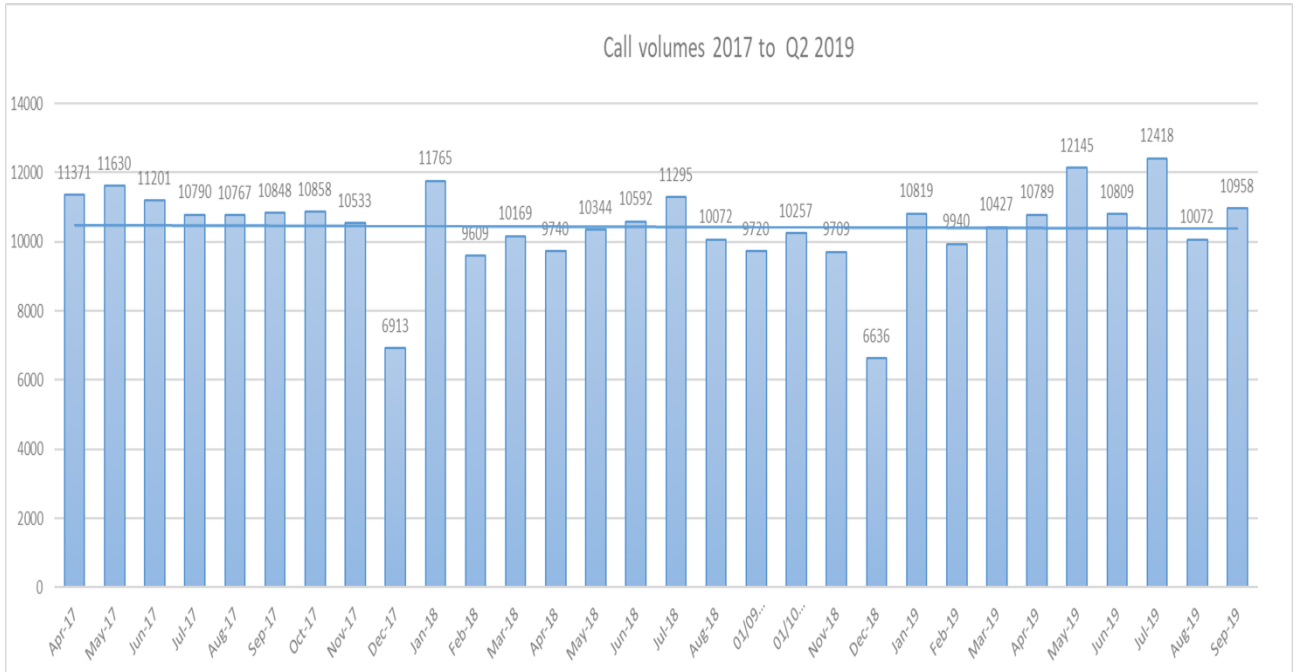
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Appendix 1



Appendix 2

