

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL**Report by Chief Officer- Citizen, Culture and Facilities****Council: 22 December 2021**

Subject: Council Contact Centre Update – Motion from Council 29 September 2021**1. Purpose**

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to update Council on the Motion agreed on 29 September 2021 regarding abandoned calls, and outline ways in which the Council could improve its Contact Centre function.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1** It is recommended that Council:
- I. note the contents of the report;
 - II. agree that officers provide further updates on Contact Centre progress at the Corporate Services Committee; and
 - III. agree that officers bring a further report on the performance of the Housing Repairs Contact Centre to a future Council meeting.

3. Background

- 3.1** At Council the following Motion was agreed:

Motion by Councillor Martin Rooney – Abandoned Calls

“This Council notes that there has been significant concern from residents about abandoned calls to the Council helpdesk.

Although the Council is not able to measure or record the average time to answer a telephone call, it does have information on abandoned calls.

In 2020 a total of 19,590 calls were abandoned which represented 17% of the total calls abandoned.

As at August 2021 7,411 calls have been abandoned which represents 15% of the total calls.

Council notes that unlike previous years, during the pandemic local residents who didn't complete their call, could attend council offices in person.

Given the above, this Council calls for the Chief Executive to bring forward a report on the how the council can improve its customer helpdesk function for the public.

The report should consider how we could measure, record and improve the average time to answer a call.

In addition, it should consider what other options may be available to ensure that the number of abandoned calls can be reduced in future years.”

- 3.2** The Council’s Contact Centre function was created in 2007 with six staff members. The initial approach was to take the original switchboard function and train staff on multiple Council services to improve the first time resolution rates to calls.
- 3.3** The Contact Centre was a success and grew to twelve staff with more services being added, including more complex and lengthy calls. In 2016/17 Citizen Services took over responsibility for the Council website. This allowed the Contact Centre and website team to work in partnership to improve the digital offer to residents, and channel shift some of the telephone calls being made. The number of online transactions was 43,000 in 2020/21 – 150% above the Council’s Strategic Plan target for the same year.
- 3.4** In 2017/18 further changes were made to centralise some of the busiest telephone areas under Citizen Services. This included the Housing Repairs Contact Centre transferring over from Building Services, staff transferring from Revenues and Benefits to manage entry level Council Tax and Housing Benefits enquiries, as well as the Scottish Welfare Fund Team.
- 3.5** As each service transferred over, the way it was delivered was analysed, simplified and shared to improve processes and document the same for training. This task allowed skill sharing of processes across the team.
- 3.6** In November 2017, a proposal was agreed at Corporate Service Committee to:
- Transfer all cash and card payments in One Stop Shops to the popular, widely-used and widely-available payment services such as Post Office and PayPoint on April 1, 2018;
 - Actively promote the most efficient payment methods of Direct Debit, online payments and the automated telephone payment line
 - Adapt existing customer services opening hours to reflect current levels of demand, and operate as efficiently as possible
 - Relocate Customer Services in Alexandria into the well-used Alexandria Library approximately 300 meters away
 - Undertakes a restructure of the Customer Services team to respond to these changes and fund increased capacity in the Contact Centre
- 3.7** From May 2018 the Contact Centre’s Opening times of 08:00 to 17:00 Monday to Friday moved more in line with the rest of the Council to 9:00 to

16:30 Monday to Thursday and 9:00 to 15:30 on Friday. Telephony data showed that on average only 1% of residents contacted the service before 9am and only 2% contacting after 4:30pm. This assisted Citizen Services to manage demand throughout the peak periods, as more staff were available to answer phones than previously was the case covering shift patterns.

3.8 The savings generated from the above decision took until the summer of 2018 to be finalised. Thereafter one additional member of staff joined the Corporate Contact Centre funded by these savings to make a total team of 13.

3.9 The following table shows general performance of the Corporate Contact Centre in recent years:

Year	Abandonment rate	Satisfaction with Contact Centre	Answered in 2 minutes
2018	17%	84%	67%
2019	13%	85%	68%
2020	17%	85%	47%
2021 (as of 30/11)	14%	72%	57%

There was a disappointing performance level in 2018 due to a three month long technical fault on the Capita Wide Area Network affecting telephone lines in July, August and September. Performance improved in 2019 and there is every reason to believe the Contact Centre processes would have continued successfully into 2020 had it not been for the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the challenges to service delivery that it brought.

4. Main Issues

4.1 The Council Contact Centre uses the Cisco Contact Centre Express (CCX) telephone platform to support our high volume telephone response. CCX is supported by Cisco Unified Intelligence Centre. The intelligence platform provides comprehensive data ranging from individual team members to overall contact centres from both live and historic performance. CCX is also used in other Council teams where telephone contact is high, such as Payroll, Finance Service Centre, ICT, Scottish Welfare Fund and Housing Repairs.

4.2 Elsewhere, the wider Council telephone estate is not supported by CCX because they are typically lower call volume hunt groups or individual telephone lines. To record performance on these lines the Council uses technology called Tiger. Tiger software delivers comprehensive analytics on the entire Council telephone network to provide insights into the activity of teams and citizen experience standards. With Cisco CCX and Tiger in place, the Council has an overall suite of data available on our telephone performance.

4.3 The CCX platform has information related to telephone performance ranging from total number of calls offered, answered and abandoned. The detail of

these calls is also recorded such as the time taken to answer, wait or abandon. These statistics are gathered each day and monitored closely.

- 4.4** It is important to note in relation to abandoned calls, that not all abandoned calls are a reflection of dissatisfaction. Some citizens may hear there are services available online, or service specific updates as part of the welcome greeting, and chose to hang up immediately. Other citizens may hear the announcement of how long the expected wait is and chose to call back at another time.
- 4.5** The general industry acceptance on abandonment rates is between 5% and 10% of calls. To achieve a lower rate than this there would generally require there to be an overstaffing of the Contact Centre areas to answer calls as soon as they are delivered. As can be seen in the table at 3.9 the corporate Contact Centre has had an average abandonment rate of approximately 15% in the most recent years. This is partly linked to the technical fault and the Covid-19 pandemic. Another key challenge in a local authority Contact Centre is that general good performance is disrupted by the statutory nature of work undertaken by the Council. For example, the billing of all residents for Council Tax, Rent, and Insurance at one time due to financial year constraints. This activity leads to major spikes in telephone contact with residents who receive the bills and seek further information at the same time. These periodic surges could only be mitigated by a significantly larger Contact Centre team which would then be underutilised at other normal periods of the year when performance is good.

Recent improvements

- 4.6** In 2021, the Contact Centre has had some significant sickness absence. However, since September there has been a settled full strength team. This has translated into a more stable and improved service. It is important to note that the Contact Centre role requires a varied skill-set and knowledge and temporary redeployment of officer's from elsewhere in the Council isn't easily possible – particularly given the volume of technology used. The Contact Centre has also been brought forward in the return to offices plan and this will further assist the team to reduce the isolation of home working.
- 4.7** In addition to the main Council Contact Centre, the Corporate Administration Service (CAS) supports resident calls transferred via the Contact Centre for Waste Services, Roads, Education and Sold Property enquiries. During lockdown there was a change in the way these services were delivered but from November 2021, the number of phone lines available in the back office to assist with these call transfers has been extended from three to ten. This improvement is already delivering immediate results for residents.
- 4.8** Housing Operations is piloting a new model of telephone contact from tenants in the Dumbarton and Alexandria area where a duty officer will receive calls to the office as opposed to tenants calling mobile phones of officers who may be absent from work. Discussions are ongoing about introducing a similar

process for the Clydebank area. This change is a positive improvement for our tenants.

- 4.9** We believe that the changes outlined at 4.6, 4.7 and 4.8 have or will further improve the corporate telephone experience for our citizens by allowing for quicker responses, faster transfers and reduced waiting times. We are confident that the performance moving forward will be at an acceptable level for citizens and Council. The table below illustrates the most up to date performance levels:

Contact Centre Call Activity - November 2021

Calls Received	% Calls Answered	Average Queue Time	Average Call Handle Time
8781	95%	39 Secs	02:43 Mins/Sec

- 4.10** Where challenges are raised by the Contact Centre team on process failures with Council service areas, or where complaints are received from citizens, the Citizen Services Management Team explore with the service area where things can be improved and amended. This feedback is essential, particularly where there is a direct impact on the number of calls being received.
- 4.11** In addition to contacting the Council by telephone, residents can also submit queries and make reports via the Council website and social media channels. There have been around 4000 contacts by social media for service requests in 2021. If these 4000 contacts had all been delivered as telephone calls we would have been under a further pressure throughout the year.
- 4.12** To further reduce the demand on our telephone service, we are revisiting our webchat offer after our initial supplier was unable to deliver on our specific requirements.
- 4.13** In terms of telephone network technology there are further improvements that are under consideration by officers. For example, we are investigating the reintroduction of call recording to assist with home working and ensuring the quality of the service. If progressed this is likely to have a revenue impact on the Council and proposals will be developed in the coming 12 months for consideration. In addition we are also working in partnership with ICT to investigate the functionality of queue positioning announcements and expected wait times to the CCX platform to improve the experience of Citizens calling the Council. It should be noted that such technology is typically expensive and officers are keen to establish if there is a tangible return on that investment. We are not in a position to make a recommendation on that at this time.
- 4.14** The motion also calls on officers to consider what other options may be available to improve performance. Other technology improvements are available in the marketplace at this time such as tracking incoming calls to see

where calls are coming from, and taking advantage of speech analytics to automatically detect which type of service is needed and direct the call to that team. Some operators have also introduced a WhatsApp/SMS option for customers to raise issues through. This level of automated technology requires services to have fully integrated processes that ensure the end to end delivery of services is seamless. Both options are likely to be costly and be significant projects to deliver. It is recommended that officers pause on these options at this time to allow the Council's Fit For Future reviews to progress through services and prepare them for technology opportunities such as this.

- 4.15** Separate to technology the only other way to reduce abandoned calls would be to increase the number of call handlers working on the team. The call handlers are currently evaluated at G4 and have an overall cost to the Council of £29,420 per post. It is the view of officers that this additional recruitment is not necessary at this time as it would lead to overcapacity at quiet times, and fail to remove queuing at the busier times identified at 4.5. There is also a management view that performance levels will improve in the months and years ahead. Elected Members can be kept updated on this position at the Corporate Services Committee as officers progress the technology solutions outlined in this report. In addition officers acknowledge the Elected Member interest in this area and will include performance indicators relating to call handling in future CCF Delivery Plans to allow for increased scrutiny at Committee.
- 4.16** It is important to be clear that this report, like the Motion, has focussed on the Council's main telephone helpdesk. Officers have not gone into detail regarding the Housing Repairs Contact Centre. This operates with the same technology as the main Contact Centre, but as has been regularly reported to Council in 2021 there have been significant problems with performance. The cause of this relates directly to the scale of outstanding repairs due to the pandemic restricting works in tenant properties during lockdown. This is leading to a high number of complex calls with tenants requesting updates on outstanding repairs which take additional time to respond to. In addition as previously reported to Council there have been sickness absence and staff turnover challenges within the team during 2021. A total of five new employees – three of whom are additional to the service - began with the Housing Repairs Contact Centre in early December 2021 and improvements to call handling will follow in the coming weeks for our tenants in terms of waits and abandonment rates. Officers will bring a report to a future Council meeting about this service area to illustrate the impact of the new employees, and the continued progress of Building Services in clearing the repairs backlog.

5. People Implications

- 5.1** There are no people implications arising from the recommendations of this report.

6. Financial and Procurement Implications

6.1 There are no financial implications arising from the recommendations of this report.

7. Risk Analysis

7.1 There are no risks arising from the recommendations of this report.

8. Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)

8.1 As no proposals are outlined in the report a screening and EIA is not required. However, the ability to contact Council services clearly needs to take into account equality considerations. To ensure that these feed into improvement options as they are developed, an impact assessment will be an integral part of the process, which will take into account the contents of this report and other available evidence.

9. Consultation

9.1 This report has been consulted on with colleagues in CAS, ICT, Housing, Finance, Legal and Procurement Services.

10. Strategic Assessment

10.1 Effective telephone call handling contributes to all five Council strategic priorities.

Malcolm Bennie
Chief Officer
Citizen, Culture and Facilities
Date: 29 November 2021

Person to Contact: Stephen Daly
Citizen and Library Services Manager
Citizen, Culture and Facilities
07583915493

Appendices: N/A

Background Papers: None

Wards Affected: All Wards

