



**EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW &
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE:
6 SEPTEMBER 2022**

CABINET: 13 SEPTEMBER 2022

Report of: Corporate Director of Transformation, Housing and Resources

Relevant Portfolio Holder: Councillor A Yates

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**SUBJECT: CUSTOMER CONTACT CENTRE CALL HANDLING – WL108
PERFORMANCE INDICATOR**

Wards affected: Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To provide details on the level of resource required to enable the target for "WL108 average answered wait time for callers to the contact centre", to reduce to 60 seconds.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS TO EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

2.1 That the report be noted and any agreed comments be referred to Cabinet for consideration.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET

3.1 That any agreed comments from the Executive Overview & Scrutiny Committee be considered.

3.2 That due to the reasons set out within the report, the target for WL108 remains at 145 seconds.

4.0 BACKGROUND

4.1 At the Executive Overview & Scrutiny Meeting on 24 February 2022, a recommendation was made, to pass comments to Cabinet for consideration, to change the proposed target for PI WL108 average answered waiting time for callers to the contact centre, from 145 seconds to 60 seconds.

- 4.2 At the Cabinet meeting on the 8 March 2022, a recommendation was made that officers undertake an evidenced based evaluation model including the resources required, to reduce the PI from 145 seconds to 60 seconds. That a report be brought back at a later date for Cabinet consideration
- 4.3 There are currently two performance indicators in relation to call handling performance; WL108 average answered wait time for callers to the Contact Centre and WL90 percentage of Contact Centre calls answered. The performance target for WL108 is 145 seconds (2 minutes 25 seconds) and WL90 is 88%.
- 4.4 The Customer Services Team are the first point of contact for all calls to the Council's main telephone number and for visitors to the two Customer Service points. They are responsible for handling calls, face to face and web enquiries on behalf of a wide range of Council services. They also act as a signposting service, referring callers to back-office teams for more specialist advice, for those services that have not been transferred into Customer Services.
- 4.5 In addition, throughout the pandemic, the team were responsible for managing the West Lancs Together Helpline, which continues to date with a reduced level of contact. They were also the first point of contact for the local Contact Tracing service and the Test and Trace Support Payments.
- 4.6 The team are committed to providing quality services to customers, where possible resolving queries at the first point of contact, to reduce repeat / avoidable contact. In addition, they support and promote the use of online facilities encouraging those customers who are able to self-serve to do so. They also ensure that they provide full support to those customers who want to access services online but need further assistance, such as signing up to a customer account, completing services online for the first time and password resets.

5.0 CURRENT POSITION

- 5.1 There are currently 11.09 full time equivalent (FTE) members of staff within the team, that handle customer interactions. They are split across three access points – the contact centre and the customer service points in Skelmersdale and Ormskirk. The contact centre handles calls between 08.30am – 5.30pm Monday to Friday. The level of FTE varies on each day as work patterns reflect customer demand. Additional factors such as annual leave, absence and training, evidence that on average 8 FTE handle calls on a daily basis during periods of normal call volumes.
- 5.2 Call patterns change throughout each day with the majority being received between the hours of 9:00am and 11:30am. Calls increase between 12:00pm – 1:30pm and rise slightly between 2:00pm – 4:00pm with the lowest point being from 5:00pm onwards. The current working patterns within the team are arranged so that more staff are available during the morning periods and staff lunch breaks are also staggered across a three-hour period instead of the usual two hours, to reduce the impact on callers during this time.

- 5.3 Whilst customers are waiting for their call to be answered, they are given a number of opportunities to request a call back. This enables them to hang up their call whilst retaining their position in the queue, with the telephony platform auto dialling their number as soon as an advisor becomes available. This removes the need for customers to wait in a queue for their call to be answered.
- 5.4 The team have supported 131,136 interactions between April 2021 and March 2022. Telephony contact equates to 65% of all customer contact.

6.0 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

- 6.1 Interaction volumes change throughout the year and resources are planned to manage expected peaks in service. There can also be unknown peaks in service which can be as a result of adverse weather conditions / unexpected events in the area. Whilst the management team are able to predict the total future resource levels to meet existing demand, peaks throughout individual days when a number of customers choose to call at the same time, particularly during service changes/new service launches is difficult to predict and can create challenges which can then impact on performance. The balance the management team always aim to achieve is a high standard of customer service against the cost.
- 6.2 Call volumes have been assessed to estimate the level of resource required to answer calls within 60 seconds. It is estimated that during normal call volume periods, 17 FTE would be required to meet a target of 60 seconds.
- 6.3 Agency staff are also utilised during known peak periods, for example the annual launch of garden waste subscriptions, to manage the increase in calls. Agency staff are normally recruited approximately two weeks in advance of the changes being introduced to undertake training. However it is important to note that it takes time for new members of staff to achieve our required standard and the evidence demonstrates they handle less calls than experienced members of staff. In addition, average call handling times increase, and they are only able to provide a limited number of services due to the level of training required.

7.0 CUSTOMER / DIGITAL SERVICE OFFER

- 7.1 The outturn position for 2021/22 in relation to WL108 was 2 minutes 43 seconds against the target of 2 minutes 25 seconds. At the time of writing this report, performance for the current financial year stands at 1 minute 56 seconds.
- 7.2 As referenced at section 4.6, ongoing active promotion and support is undertaken by the team, to encourage customers who can access services online and support them to set up an online account.
- 7.3 Ongoing active promotion of channel shift and online services is also included as part of the Contact Centre's Interactive Voice Response (IVR) facility, which actively encourages customers to hang up their call and access services online instead of waiting to speak to an advisor.

- 7.4 During 2020/21, the Council needed to change its approach to customer contact as a result of the pandemic, to enable a clear focus on providing essential services only. In addition, ensuring support over the telephone was accessible to those customers who had no other way of making direct contact with us, to enable us to focus on providing essential service to our most vulnerable residents. This resulted in a direct push to move those customers who can access services online to do so.
- 7.5 An example of the success of transitioning those customers who can, onto online services is detailed below, in relation to garden waste subscriptions over a three-year period.

Garden Waste Subscriptions		
Year	Total number of subscriptions	Percentage of subscriptions completed online
2019/20	20,221	64%
2020/21	21,409	91%
2021/22	21,781	86%

- 7.6 The table above demonstrates that there is a significant number of residents who can access services online, but their preference may be to call and speak to an advisor.
- 7.7 Introducing a reduction in target for call wait times, actively encourages customers to transact over the telephone. In addition, if this is not resourced appropriately the quality in service that customers receive will reduce, as the advisers focus will be on answering and resolving calls quickly as opposed to focussing on providing a quality service to each customer and making every contact count.
- 7.8 Members support is crucial in terms of transitioning those customers that can interact with us online do so, freeing up time to assist and support those customers who have no access to online services.

8.0 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 There are no significant sustainability impacts associated with this report and, in particular, no significant impact on crime and disorder.

9.0 FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The analysis and costs outlined are based on the current operating model only.
- 9.2 To answer calls within 60 seconds would require an additional 9 FTE to handle calls during periods of normal call volumes. Based on the bottom scale of the annual salary grade of £25,380 (including on costs) for a Customer Services Assistant, this would cost the Council an additional £228,420 during the first year.
- 9.3 During peak periods a further 9 FTE would be required, based on current evidence. This resource would be required for approximately 12 weeks and reviewed on a daily/weekly basis to ensure agency staff are only utilised when necessary. Utilising agency staff for this period would result in an additional

maximum cost of £40,707.36. Therefore, the total annual cost for the increased levels of staff equates to £269,127.36.

- 9.4 Historically, budget has been provided for agency staff to support the roll out of each new subscription year for garden waste. This budget is only available until 2023/24. It is therefore imperative that support is given to the approach taken in 2020/21, to ensure those customers who can access services online do so and only those customers who have no other way of interacting with the Council can contact over the telephone. In addition, active encouragement of direct debit subscriptions is imperative as this will further reduce the need for agency staff.
- 9.5 In addition to an increase in staffing budgets, additional funding would also be required for system licence fees and ICT equipment.
- 9.6 Any additional costs are not currently budgeted for and therefore a saving would need to be identified to allow this investment.

10.0 RISK ASSESSMENT

- 10.1 This item is for information only and makes no recommendations. It therefore does not require a formal risk assessment and no changes have been made to risk registers.

Background Documents

There are no background documents (as defined in Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972) to this Report.

Equality Impact Assessment

The decision does not have any direct impact on members of the public, employees, elected members and / or stakeholders. Therefore no Equality Impact Assessment is required.

Appendices

1. Minute of Executive Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 6 September 2022 (Cabinet only)