

HIGH PEAK BOROUGH COUNCIL

Corporate Select Committee

29 March 2021

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| TITLE: | Customer Services Update |
| EXECUTIVE COUNCILLOR: | Councillor Anthony McKeown - Council Leader HPBC |
| CONTACT OFFICER: | Karen Lomas – Head of Customer Services |
| WARDS INVOLVED: | ALL |

Appendices Attached – Appendix A Customer Contact Volumes

1. Reason for the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update in regard to the Council's Customer Service provision.
- 1.2 The report provides an overview of the Customer Services function, the various workstreams, reflects on the impact of Covid-19 on the service and identifies some of the potential challenges.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 Members are asked to note and comment upon the contents of this update.

3. Executive Summary

- 3.1 The report sets out the various workstreams provided as part of the Customer Services function, including
 - Frontline service, first point of contact for all service areas via all channels, digital, phones, face to face
 - Triage and validation service for Revenues and Benefits
 - Post and Print
 - Customer Feedback
 - Planning Validation
- 3.2 The report also discusses the changes and adaptations that have been made as a result of the impact of Covid-19.

3.3 There have been changes to the way in which customers have contacted the Council over the last 12 months, with receptions closed and an increase in telephone / digital contact. However, there is recognition of the 'digital divide' and the importance of supporting customers who are digitally excluded.

3.4 The Access to Services Strategy due to be presented later in 2021 will have a focus on digital exclusion as well as continually improving the overall customer experience and enhancing access utilising technology.

4. **How this report links to Corporate Priorities**

4.1 Aim 2 of the Council's corporate plan:- 'a responsive, smart, financially resilient and forward-thinking council'. Key Objective: Ensure our services are readily available to all our residents in the appropriate channels and provided "right first time".

5. **Alternative Options**

5.1 This is an information report and so there are no alternative options.

Claire Hazeldene

Acting Executive Director (Finance and Customer Services)

Web Links and Background Papers

Access to Services Information Digest Report
October 2020

Contact details

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6. Introduction

- 6.1 This report provides an overview of the Customer Services function, the various workstreams, reflects on the impact of Covid-19 on the service and identifies some of the potential challenges. It also highlights the work that is taking place in regard to the preparation of the Access to Services Strategy.
- 6.2 The Customer Services function encompasses a number of different workstreams including:
- Frontline service, first point of contact for all service areas via all channels, digital, phones, face to face
 - Triage and validation service for Revenues and Benefits
 - Post and Print
 - Customer Feedback
 - Planning Validation
- 6.3 Further detail on each stream is provided below.

7. Frontline Customer Services

Face to Face service

- 7.1 The Council currently operate 3 receptions across the Borough;
- Town Hall, Buxton
 - Municipal Buildings, Glossop
 - Gamesley Neighbourhood Office, Gamesley
- 7.2 At the beginning of the COVID -19 pandemic in March 2020, in order to protect staff and the general public the decision was taken to close all of the receptions. Customers were informed of the closure via the Council's websites and social media and notices were displayed on the doors and windows at reception sites providing alternative channels of access and offering assistance via telephone.
- 7.3 Appointments have continued to be offered to meet face to face for those who cannot access services online and cannot receive the assistance required by telephone.
- 7.4 During this period, the Council has seen increased channel shift, reduced costs in relation to changing payment methods and increased staff capacity. The extra resource has been utilised to assist with additional calls and the building and processing of application forms required for business grants and financial assistance.
- 7.5 As part of the COVID recovery plan, within the workstreams 'reinstating services' and 'positive legacy', consideration will be given to how these changes may continue to operate. For example, a review of overall reception provision and how this can be best targeted to support the most vulnerable within the community.

Contact Centre

- 7.6 The contact centre operates between 9am and 5pm Monday – Friday. During the past 12 months, this has continued to operate business as usual with staff picking up calls either from the office or at home. There are 7 lines coming into the contact centre;
- Housing Service
 - Public Calls (General)
 - Council Tax and Business Rates
 - Environmental and Waste
 - Benefits
 - Elections
 - Planning
- 7.6 The highest percentage of calls come through on the Housing Line followed by Public Calls (general enquiries) line and then thrirdly Revenues. A high volume of the housing calls relate to housing repairs.
- 7.7 **Appendix A** illustrates the volumes of calls received during the period Mar – Dec 2020 as a comparison to volumes received same period 2019. As expected there has been an increase in calls as receptions are closed plus the extra demand from residents and business seeking financial assistance.
- 7.8 The *average* time to process an enquiry was 10 minutes. The *average* time to answer a call for the period March 2020 - Dec 2020 was 1.5 minutes.

Digital channels

- 7.9 The Council has a responsive website allowing customers to view on all devices (mobile, tablet, PC). Webpages provide additional information and FAQs for each service enabling customers to access services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- 7.9 There are currently 220 online forms available to pay, apply, report. There is the facility to build forms in-house which has enabled a quick reaction to the business grant, self-isolation and community support initiatives.
- 7.10 Forms submitted go direct to the service area, a high percentage are integrated to back office systems improving processing times, getting it right first time and improving the customer experience .
- 7.11 35,000 customers have now opened a 'One Vue' customer portal account, with 20% of account holders in the 65yrs + age bracket.
- 7.12 Revenues and Benefits requests are trackable and customers can check on the progress via their customer account, they can also check on all submitted requests for service. Waste collection services will also be added to this facility during 2021.

- 7.13 **Appendix A** illustrates the volume of on-line forms used in 2020, compared to 2019. Since closing receptions, the volume of overall contact has reduced. However, volumes of calls have increased slightly and volumes of self-serve online forms have increased by 18%.
- 7.14 The number of general web-hits has increased by 23%, as customers search for information to assist with their enquiry
- 7.15 There has also been a shift towards payments made online and by direct debit which are much easier and efficient ways to pay and less costly to the Council.

Digital Divide

- 7.16 The Council recognises that although in a high percentage of cases, digital is the preferred method of accessing services, there are also people who may be digitally excluded because they do not have access to the required infrastructure and/or devices, or they have a lack of skills/ motivation to use technology.
- 7.17 The Council is working with partner organisations and community groups across the Borough to assist residents in accessing equipment and training. One example of this is PC Refurb, based in Glossop, which has the charitable purpose of bridging the 'digital divide' and of addressing the growing disadvantage of 'digitally excluded' people, many vulnerable, who are unable to access computers and the internet.
- 7.19 The Customer Services Team are also providing assistance over the phone for account opening, completing forms and setting up email addresses
- 7.20 Digital Exclusion will be one of the areas of specific focus in the Access to Services Strategy (see section 12).

8. Post and Print

- 8.1 Members of the customer service team report to the office to process incoming and outgoing mail, scan documents to service areas and print documents as requested. As expected, as staff work from home there has been a reduction in volumes of printing. The use of electronic communication is continually promoted to reduce the Council's carbon footprint and provide efficiencies.

9. Customer Feedback

- 9.1 All feedback is triaged on receipt and where applicable we will resolve the issue informally by raising a request for service or discussing with the service area involved.
- 9.2 Although some services may have been unavoidably disrupted during the past 12 months the Council has continued to receive really positive feedback across all service areas some of which are in recognition of provision of service during such challenging times. There has also been a reduction in the number of complaints received

10. Planning Validation

- 10.1 Customer Services validate planning applications, processing all the necessary checks before passing to the planning officers for a decision to be made. During the period March 2020 to Dec 2020 559 applications were validated, averaging 3 days per application.

11. Training and development of staff

- 11.1 Customer advisors complete a thorough training plan to enable them to answer all enquiries at first point of contact, referring to the internet / intranet for up to date information and also a number of service specific applications i.e. Revenues and Benefits and Housing systems.
- 11.2 Continual training is undertaken. The service has weekly Wednesday morning training sessions, however as a result of Covid-19 and increase in phone calls this has paused and the phone lines have reopened during the 2 hour 'training' slot of 9am-11am. However, this will be reviewed as part of the reinstating services programme as it is valuable time for all of the team to get together and engage in training programmes.
- 11.3 Members of the customer services team have secured promotions within the Alliance and therefore the service has recruited externally to vacant posts.
- 11.4 Over the past 12 months, advisors have had cause to demonstrate even greater customer empathy at a time when they too may be under personal strain. Support internally and externally is available and staff have access to these networks for themselves and for sign posting customers.

12. Next Steps - Access To Services Strategy

- 12.1 An Information Digest report was issued to members in October 2020 providing details of the proposed development of the Access to Services Strategy.
- 12.2 The Corporate Plan, launched in 2019, includes an objective to develop a Strategy outlining how the Council will provide access to services, to keep improving the customer experience and utilise technology to improve access and free up capacity to support those residents and businesses that need it.
- 12.3 To deliver this, Customer Services will be working with service areas and partners to:
- Understand more about customer demand and expectation, use technology to integrate across Council and partner services where there is a business case to do so.
 - Identify a standard of quality and maintain this so that customers are assured of the Councils commitment to provide the best possible service whatever channel of access is used.
 - When promoting access channels, reflect both the need of the customer and the capacity of the channel to meet this, it is vital that access to service is designed to operate to maximum efficiency.

- Standardise service processes so that all delivery methods are equally available and convenient to the customer paying particular attention to those who are digitally excluded perhaps because they lack internet access and/or have low levels of digital literacy.

12.4 The Council is currently aiming to present the Access to Services Strategy later in 2021.