

**COMT
CUSTOMER FIRST ADVISORY GROUP
SCRUTINY PANEL (SERVICE DELIVERY &
RESOURCES)
CABINET**

**22ND NOVEMBER 2005
29TH NOVEMBER 2005
6TH DECEMBER 2005
15TH DECEMBER 2005**

**CALL CENTRE PERFORMANCE AND PROPOSED
CHANGES TO CALL-HANDLING ARRANGEMENTS
(Report by Director of Commerce & Technology)**

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 The purpose of this paper is to report to Cabinet on the performance of the call centre in its first month of operation and to seek approval for certain changes in call-handling arrangements as a result of our experience in that month.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Cabinet approved the setting-up of a call centre at its meeting on 9th June 2003. Since then:

- A contract was signed with Cambridgeshire County Council on 21st March 2005 for the provision of various support services, including hosting call centre software on their Cambridgeshire Direct hardware platform and providing maintenance and technical support.
- A call centre team, comprising a Call Centre Manager, a Business Support Manager, two team leaders and fourteen full-time and part-time Customer Service Advisors, has been appointed.
- The call centre went live on 22nd September 2005.

- 2.2 In accordance with members' wishes, when the call centre went live it did so without many of the features which are standard in the vast majority of call centres, namely the use of queuing systems, recorded announcements and menu options¹. The only recorded announcement used is an out-of-hours message advising callers of the centre's opening hours and providing the Council's emergency number.

- 2.3 The exception is the use of recorded music, which members also expressed unease about. Where the customer is being transferred to the back office, a few seconds' music is played. This is a function of the way the underlying system has been set up, and is not something we can change.

3. PERFORMANCE TO DATE

- 3.1 The centre's performance to date – the period from 22nd September to 11th November 2005² - is as follows:

¹ Examples of some of the more highly-regarded local government call centres, including a number which have won customer service awards, are attached at Annex A.

² This period applies to calls received on 388388 as well as Streetscene calls. Streetscene calls were transferred into the Call Centre on 12 October 2005, so statistics for these calls are for the period 12th October to 11th November.

	Number	%
Total calls received	20756	100.0
Calls answered	19950	96.1
Lost calls ³	806	3.9
For calls answered	19950	100.0
Calls answered within 20 seconds	19451	97.5
Average time to answer a call (seconds)	4.0	N/A
Streetscene calls received ⁴	2501	100.0
Streetscene calls resolved first time by the advisor ⁵	2101	84.0

The key performance statistics compare to our targets as follows:

	Actual	Target
Calls answered within 20 seconds (%)	97.5	80.0
Lost calls (%)	3.9	5.0

- 3.2 While this is a limited sample based on the first month of operation (5 weeks in the case of switchboard calls), it is a very encouraging start. There have been some inevitable teething problems, but the knowledge needed to deal efficiently and effectively with customers' requests is being captured within the system, and such problems will have been largely eradicated by the time the call centre officially launches early in 2006.
- 3.3 Now is a good time to reconsider the way the call centre operates, having had its "soft launch"⁶ but before its official launch. Customers' feedback has shown that they:
- are pleased to be getting through to the Council more often and more quickly than previously; and
 - would like to be able to leave a message when no-one is available to take their call quickly, rather than hang on the line indefinitely or have to ring back later.
- There are ways to improve the service further, but these would require us to change the way the telephone system is set up.
- 3.4 Customers occasionally still get an engaged tone, and this is increasingly likely to occur as more services are transferred into the call centre. We could avoid the need for this, except at exceptionally busy times. We have many more lines than we are currently using, but the system is currently set up for 10 advisors, the maximum who will be on any one shift. If all 10 are busy, the 11th caller will get an engaged tone. An advisor will probably become free in the next few seconds, but someone else is then likely to have got ahead of the unlucky 11th caller, who will have to ring back later to get through. Queuing, a well-known and widely-accepted British pastime, seems fairer.
- 3.5 If we introduced such a system, OFCOM regulations would require us to have a recorded announcement to advise customers that they were in a queue, because they would be paying for holding. However, we could use

³ Calls abandoned by the caller before getting through to an advisor.

⁴ Streetscene calls are those relating to refuse collection, assisted collection, car parks, notification of change, assets, grounds and maintenance, etc, as opposed to switchboard calls. The expectation is that the customer service advisors should be able to deal with the majority of Streetscene calls, whereas they will generally hand on switchboard calls.

⁵ Without having to hand the call off to the back office.

⁶ Meaning the Call Centre is live, but no publicity has been given to the service.

that as an opportunity to allow people to remain in the queue or to leave a message asking us to call them back.

- 3.6 Having such a announcement would provide another benefit. The Call Centre Manager and team leaders would like to be able to record calls routinely⁷ for training purposes. To do this, the Data Protection Act requires us to advise the customer beforehand. The only way to guarantee that we give that announcement to our customers every time is to do it by way of a recorded message.

4. **PROPOSED CHANGE**

- 4.1 Bearing in mind members' reservations, the following is proposed as a 3-month trial:

- We increase the number of operational lines at the call centre from 10 to 30
- We introduce a recorded announcement advising customers that their calls may be recorded for training purposes. This message will play immediately before a customer service advisor takes the call.
- We introduce a separate recorded announcement, which would play if the customer had been waiting for 30 seconds, asking if they wanted to be held in a queue, and asking them if they would prefer to leave a message. If they choose to stay on the line they will continue to hear a tone. If they want to leave a message they will have to dial 1 to do so.

- 4.2 Carrying out a trial will enable us to minimise the risk that customers perceive a reduction rather than an improvement in the level of service. We will make a further report to members after the trial, setting out the results in terms of:

- the performance statistics set out in paragraph 3.1 above;
- the customer feedback we have received; and
- the impact it has had on advisor training.

Should we choose to revert to our current arrangements, we have been advised by the County Council, who are responsible for setting up the system, that it can be changed back at no cost.

- 4.3 The Members Customer First Advisory Group has received this report and been consulted on these proposals. Members welcomed the performance figures and indicated that they would be prepared for the trial to go ahead as proposed.

5. **CONCLUSIONS**

- 5.1 The call centre has got off to a good start. Customers are experiencing a better level of service than they did previously, understandably given the Council's investment in increased resources, and are generally happy with the service.

- 5.2 There is scope to improve the service further, by virtually eliminating the engaged tone, by providing customers a facility to leave a message when we are busy, and by recording calls for training purposes. All of these improvements require us to use a recorded message.

⁷ At the moment, customer service advisors can only record individual calls, for example if a customer is being threatening or abusive.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 Cabinet is recommended to approve the trial use of call queuing for a 3-month period as set out in paragraph 4.1.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT 1985

Cabinet report and decision dated 09/06/03

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Annex A

COMPARISON OF OTHER COUNCILS' CALL CENTRE FACILITIES

Authority	Telephone number	Call Queue	Engaged tone	IVR*?	Hold music	Position in Queue	Comments
East Riding	01482 393 939	Y	N	N	N	Y	
Knowsley	0151 489 6000	Y	N	N	N	Y	Opening times were mentioned
Liverpool	0151 233 3000	Y	N	N	Y	Y	
Tameside	0161 342 8355	Y	N	Y	N	Y	
Sedgemoor	01278 435 435	Y	N	N	N	Y	Calls recorded for training purposes
Epsom & Ewell	01372 732 000	Y	N	N	N	Y	Calls recorded for training purposes
Kirklees	01484 414858	Y	N	N	Y	N	Calls recorded for training purposes
Wyre	01253 891 000	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Goes to switch board first then the calls gets transferred to the call centre
Harlow	01279 446 655	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Calls recorded for training purposes
Three Rivers	01923 776 611	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	They can leave a message or enter the extension number they require
Swale	01795 417 850	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Calls recorded for training purposes
Note: * - IVR = Interactive Voice Response (recorded message + menu options)							