Report to Communities Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 5 March 2024

Portfolio: Customer & Communities - Cllr Smruti Patel & Cllr Ray Balcombe

Subject: Customer Contact Centre

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Recommendations/Decisions Required:

That the Committee receives an update on the performance of the Customer Contact Centre over the past 12 months and notes the work which is underway to review and further enhance the performance of the service moving forwards.

1. Report:

1.1 Background

The Contact Centre provides a telephony service for the Council between the hours of 9.00am and 5.15pm Monday to Thursday and 9.00am to 5.00pm Friday. Calls taken directly via the Contact Centre cover every aspect of the Council`s business including Waste, Planning, Environmental Health, and signposting for other services. The Contact Centre also manages customer online enquiries via the Council`s website and social media mediums.

Additionally, staff from the team provide information and guidance through the provision of a Welcome Desk service at the Civic Offices. Visitors to the Civic Offices Community Hub are greeted and signposted to appropriate partner agencies or organised activity sessions facilitated within the Hub, and those with appointments are made welcome. The Welcome Officer also manages incoming customer emails in relation to Planning Directorate enquiries and wider administrative duties in relation directly to Customer Services.

Outside of the Council`s core business hours, an "Out of Hours` service is provided. A new contract for this service was awarded on 1st October 2023 to SPS Doorguard Limited and proactive monitoring and on-going dialogue with the new provider is ensuring this is working well.

1.2 Staff resources

The Contact Centre itself is made up of 8.8 FTE Customer Service Officers, who are overseen by the Team Manager - Customer Satisfaction & Complaints, and a dedicated Lead Customer Service Officer.

The wider Customer Service area is made up of a part-time Operations Development Specialist, two further Lead Customer Service Officers with focussed remits and a Complaints & Customer Satisfaction Officer. The Service Manager – Customer & Communities has overall responsibility for all functions and resources.

<u>1.3 New telephony system</u>
In October 2023 the new cloud hosted telephony system, Cirrus, was introduced, which facilitates internal and external telephone calls and is integrated with MS Teams. Following some minor inevitable teething problems, the Contact Centre has seen improvements in the overall call handling function and, in particular, increased real time visibility in respect of the nature of the calls waiting to be answered. This has enabled the Contact Centre Manager to focus resources in such a way as to expediate calls through to conclusion in the best possible way.

Whilst the Cirrus system has provided greater transparency on incoming calls and clearly has a wide capability to deliver a plethora of reports, it`s acknowledged that further work will need to be undertaken to fully unlock and realise the full benefits of such over the coming weeks and months.

<u>1.4 Current KPIs collect in respect of the Customer Services area.</u>
The historical Key Performance Indicators (KPI`s) by which the Customer Services area has been reviewed are as follows:

- Overall Customer Satisfaction – target 80%
- First Point Resolution – target 70%
- Complaints resolved within SLA – target 85%

For reasons that are drawn out in more detail within this report, it`s acknowledged that these KPIs do not realistically provide the information needed to really understand performance. This, in turn, has restricted the ability to drive forward meaningful and ambitious continuous improvement for customers.

2. Performance over the past 12 months:

The existing KPI figures are reported on a quarterly basis through the Council`s Overview 7 Scrutiny Committee. A summary table of the data recorded for 2023-24 is as follows:

KPI descriptor:	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3
Overall Customer Satisfaction	63.60%	56.3%	63.39%
First Point Resolution	69.30%	76.2%	58.25%
Complaints resolved within Service Level Agreement	89%	86%	77%

With the implementation of the new telephony system in Quarter 3, the Team saw an initial dip in "first point resolution" performance as Officers got to grips with the new Cirrus technology. The functionality of Cirrus does require call handlers to log if a call was resolved at the "first point" manually in a separate place, which all adds precious seconds to busy workloads. It`s accurate to say that, in reality, the Contact Centre did resolve a far higher number of calls in Quarter 3, but complete data was simply not captured in the early stages of Cirrus being rolled out.

3. Review plans and progress to date:

<u>3.1 Setting the scene.</u>
It has become evident over some time that the approach, tools, and reporting mechanisms in respect of assessing the performance of the Contact Centre specifically, but also the broader functions of the Customer Services area within the Council, need to be reviewed in order to ensure continuous improvement and an optimum, excellent experience for customers moving forwards.

Enhanced metrics and the ability to accurately gather these in an easy way which does not

place cumbersome, time-consuming burdens on front line staff is key to success.

A thorough review of all aspects of the Contact Centre in particular is, therefore, underway. The review will involve a number of approaches over the coming months, however, the initial focus has been to undertake a survey with other councils in Essex, and wider, to begin to benchmark Epping Forest District Council`s service and performance in line with other authorities.

3.1 Methodology for the survey with other Local Authorities
In December 2023, a simple survey was devised comprising of the following questions and sent out to neighbouring Councils by the Service Manager:

❖ What services does your Contact Centre take calls for?
❖ What is your Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff resource?
❖ What is your average:
   ➢ Call volume per month
   ➢ Wait time (speed to answer)
   ➢ Abandoned rate
   ➢ Call duration
   ➢ First point resolution
❖ What target do you set for emails
❖ Do you make outbound calls
❖ What are the opening times of your phones
❖ Do you measure customer satisfaction, if so, what are your KPI's

The survey was helpfully completed and returned by the following 14 Councils in early January 2024:

- Basildon
- Braintree
- Brentwood
- Castlepoint
- Chelmsford
- Colchester
- East Herts (information shared in response to an FOI request)
- Harlow
- Maldon
- Rochford
- Southend
- Tendring
- Thurrock
- Uttlesford

Details of the responses received can be found at Appendix A.

3.2 Key findings from survey undertaken with other Councils:
Whilst Contact Centre opening times are fairly similar across the piece, there are differences in respect of the exact services and functions other Council`s Contact Centres provide. It is, therefore, not possible to precisely compare like-for-like due to key variables.

For comparison purposes, the Councils which are closest aligned to Epping Forest District Council`s Contact Centre offer are Uttlesford, Tendring and Braintree. The services covered, call volumes and staff resources in these three Councils are commensurate with EFDC`s.

All local authorities who took part in the survey collect the same standard Contact Centre day-

to-day metrics as EFDC, as drawn out the questions posed.

The survey highlighted that only eight of the fourteen respondents currently attempt to measure "overall customer satisfaction", with just four Councils reporting on an actual KPI with this broad description. Furthermore, the methods used by these Councils to capture "overall customer satisfaction" varied widely from undertaking a bespoke survey every two years, to staff making outbounds phone calls to customers, or surveys being requested at the end of calls.

The findings of the survey call into question how meaningful it is for EFDC`s to continue to attempt to measure "overall customer satisfaction" as a KPI. The reality is that this KPI is too generic. The tendency is for customers to leave feedback which directly relates to the outcome of the specific enquiry they have or, for example, a request they may have made which may not be in the Council`s gift to resolve, as opposed to providing feedback on the level of satisfaction they experience in relation to the service they receive from the Contact Centre itself.

Furthermore, unlike other systems, the technology EFDC`s Contact Centre currently has at its disposal doesn`t allow for an automated customer satisfaction survey to be generated at the end of phone calls. This particular functionality would incur additional costs to the Council, therefore, at present, responses are only captured for customers using the Council`s website and online forms. In the past year only 4% of all the customers who contacted EFDC left feedback via the existing customer satisfaction platform.

Eight other Councils measure "first point resolution" (queries resolved by Contact Centre staff themselves the first time the customer phones in) and EFDC`s KPI target of 70% appears to be consistent with others in this respect.

All respondents measure their "resolution of complaints" in a commentate way to EFDC.

In comparison to Uttlesford, Tendring and Braintree Councils` Contact Centres, which handle a similar volume of calls as EFDC and have a similar staff resource, it is apparent that EFDC`s Contact Centre appears to be falling slightly behind its peers in respect of the length of time customers wait for their call to be answered and also the number of customers who hang up whilst waiting in the queue. Therefore, by working closely with these specific authorities it will be possible for EFDC to take key learning from these teams, identify specific areas of focus to work on and adopt models of good practice accordingly.

3.3 Proposals for further consideration and next steps
Underpinning all the work which will be undertaken over the coming months to enhance and continue to improve the performance of the Customer Contact Centre is the need to gather clear and meaningful data. To this end, the Service Manager, Team Manager and senior officers will work closely with the appropriate technology Business Partners to fully understand the capabilities of the Cirrus system in the first instance. If it is identified that there is the ability for specific data or key reports to be generated which could help improve performance, but it transpires there`s additional costs associated with enabling this functionality, cost benefit analysis will be undertaken, and decisions taken accordingly in this respect.

Further staff training on the Cirrus system and its full potential will be arranged to ensure maximum benefit is achieved.

Working closely with other Councils with a similar Contact Centre offer to EFDC, key learning will be sought and implemented, as appropriate, in order to improve the time customers wait for their call to be answered.

Work will be undertaken to establish an improved "contact request" system whereby the Council`s technical officers are alerted to the fact that a customer requires a call back, as opposed to customers being put through to a voicemail message system.

Clear recommendations will be made as part of the overarching corporate review into KPIs generally. As already explained in detail within this report, the historic data and KPIs captured in respect of the Contact Centre and wider customer services needs refreshing to provide clearer insight.

Ultimately, in liaison with key stakeholders, a short, medium and long-term improvement plan will be developed for the Contact Centre underpinned by the Council`s Fit for the Future Transformation Programme which includes a key Digital Customer pillar.

Reason for decision: To note the update on the performance of the Customer Contact Centre and the proposals for enhancing the performance of the service moving forwards.

Options considered and rejected: N/A

Consultation undertaken: Consultation with Local Authorities across Essex and one Hertfordshire local authority

Resource implications: None
Legal and Governance Implications: None

Safer, Cleaner, Greener Implications: None

Background Papers: None
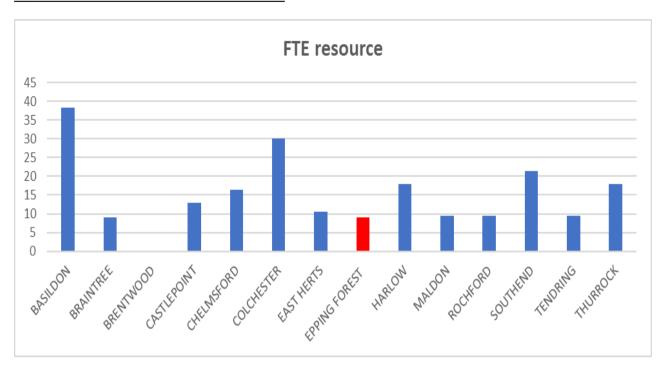
Risk Management: None

Equality: None

APPENDIX A

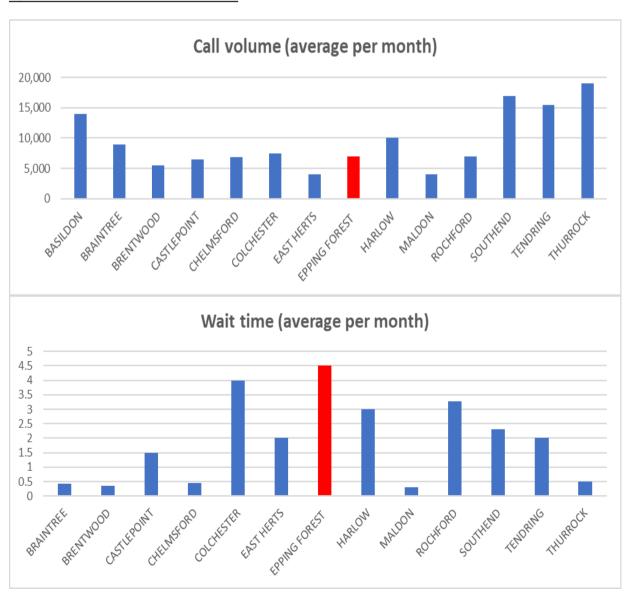**Local Authority Contact Centre Survey**
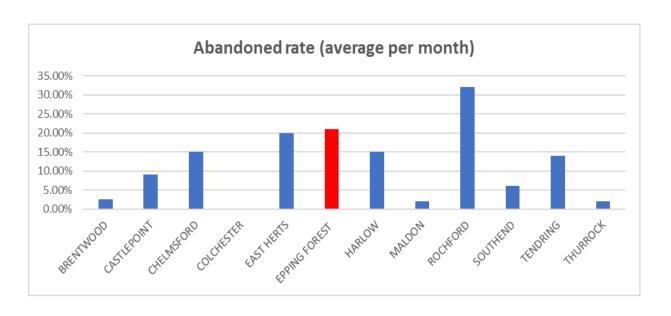
Question 1. Services covered by contact centres

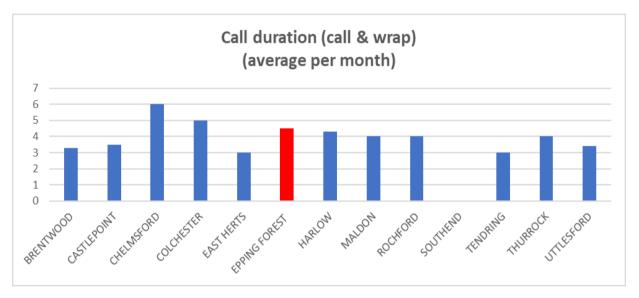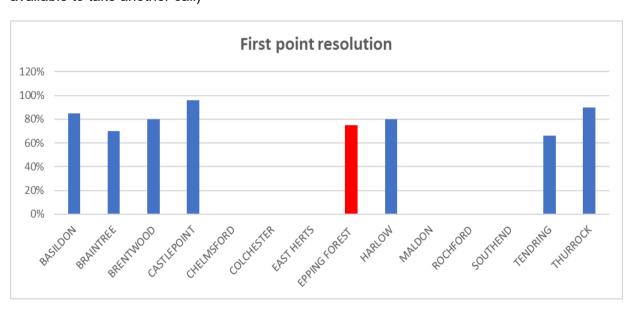| Local Authority	What services do you take calls for
BASILDON	Benefits also for Brentwood, Council Tax also for Brentwood, Housing, Homeless Prevention, Electoral Services, Rent, Planning, Street care, EVH, Special collections, Members, Complaints, Payments
BRAINTREE	Environmental, Pest Control, Refuse, Recycling, Street Cleansing, Bulky Waste (Furniture) Collections, Food Vouchers, Messages for Housing Assessment, Housing Options, Planning, Complaints
BRENTWOOD	Refuse and recycling, bulky waste collections, Housing General, Housing Estates, Housing Needs, Environmental Health & Licensing, Planning, Building Control, Parking
CASTLEPOINT	Benefits, Council Tax, Environmental Health, Halls, Housing Options, Planning & Building Control, Refuse & Recycling, Street scene
CHELMSFORD	Benefits, Council Tax, Housing, Homelessness, Electoral, Public Health, Parks, Planning, Building Control
COLCHESTER	Colchester Borough Homes, Building Control, Planning, Licensing, Food Safety(C&E), Neighbourhood services i.e. Recycling and Waste, Road Closures, Allotments, Markets. Green areas i.e. parks, grass cutting
EAST HERTS	Waste, Parking and Benefits
EPPING FOREST	All except Housing & Repairs
HARLOW	Every service except Repairs
MALDON	Council Tax, Housing Benefits, Housing (Homelessness, Prevention, and Gateway), Waste & Recycling Planning, Building Control, Enforcement, Elections, Parks & Open spaces, Environmental Health (Noise, Licencing), Abandoned vehicles, lost/stray dogs, Payments, Parking, Community Development, Cemetries, Councillors
ROCHFORD	EH, Revenues and Benefits, Planning, Building Control, Licensing, Housing, Waste, Open Spaces, Payments, Car Parking
SOUTHEND	Council Tax, Benefits, Planning/Building control, Housing options/housing officer queries, Environmental Health, Elections, Licensing, General enquiries
TENDRING	Benefits, Council Tax, NNDR, Housing Enquiries, Housing Repairs, Private Sector Housing, Environmental, Waste, Garden Waste, Abandoned Vehicles
THURROCK	Awards, Benefits, Building Control, Complaints, Council Tax, Environmental, Payments, Councillor Calls, Highways, Homeless, Housing allocations, Housing - Tenancy management, Planning, Recovery, Rents, Schools, Sundry Invoice, Switchboard, Waste & Recycling
UTTLESFORD	Council Tax, Benefits, Planning/Building control, Housing options/housing officer queries, Environmental Health, Elections, Licensing, general district council enquiries

Question 2. Contact Centre FTE resource

FTE resource

Question 3. Contact Centre metrics

Call volume (average per month)

Wait time (average per month)

Abandoned rate (average per month)

Call duration (call & wrap) (average per month)

(Note. Wrap time includes the admin required after ending the call before the Officer is available to take another call)

First point resolution

Question 4 – What target to do you set for email responses?
Answers ranged from one day to acknowledge and up to ten working days to resolve; this is in line with the Councils timescales for response.

Question 5 – Do you make outbound calls?
Nine local authorities make outbound calls, this ranges from taking Payments to processing Housing Applications. The Council do make ad hoc outbound calls to follow up with customers as required, for example to take payments for new bin requests and licensing fees.

Question 6 – What are your opening hours?

EFDC`s Contact Centre opening hours are comparable with those Local Authorities who participated in the survey.

Question 7 – What are your KPI's?
This question is covered in the main report.