Report for:	Finance and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Title of report:	Customer Service Update
Date:	5th March 2024
Report on behalf of:	Councillor Carole Weston, Portfolio Holder for People and Transformation
Part:	I
If Part II, reason:	n/a
Appendices:	Nil
Background papers:	Nil
Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:	RAG – RED, Amber, Green CSU – Customer Service Unit IVR - Integrated Voice Recognition Service KPI – Key Performance Indicator CLT – Corporate Leadership Team SLT – Strategic Leadership Team

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Corporate Priorities	Ensuring efficient, effective and modern service delivery
Wards affected	N/A
Purpose of the report:	1. To provide the committee with an update on work being undertaken to improve performance within the Customer Services Unit.
Recommendation:	1. For the committee to review and provide feedback.
Period for post policy/project review:	

Customer Service Update

1.0 Introduction

1.1. This service update paper of the people section was requested by the Chair of the Finance and Resource Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The brief was to provide the committee with a status on efforts being undertaken to reduce call wait times for customers and residents telephoning Dacorum Council's customer services number.

2.0 Background

2.1. The Customer Service Unit (CSU) was created following the consolidation of public facing telephone numbers and call handlers that were previously sitting within services across the Council into one central function which would act as the front office for most service. This led to a single switchboard number (01442 228000) being created which would route through to the CSU to answer and resolve queries in the first instance.

2.2. In 2013, the service was outsourced to Northgate to deliver savings/efficiencies and a target of 5-minute call wait time (300 seconds) was set as a performance measure as part of the contract. Northgate undertook a review of the resourcing levels and management structure and a number of roles were deleted to deliver savings.

2.3. The outsourced contract was reviewed, and the service was brought back in house in 2017 and the same staffing levels were retained. Service level agreements are now in place between CSU and the different services across the Council to answer calls, resolve queries and process some front office transactions on behalf of services (e.g. processing payments, booking appointments etc.)

2.4. Calls in relation to housing repairs are not currently processed by the CSU as this service forms part of the Housing Repairs contract currently provided by Osbornes Property Services Limited. Any calls in relation to Housing repairs that come in to the CSU are transferred back to Osbornes.

2.5. The CSU is currently resourced with 16.8 full time equivalent (FTE) CSU representatives, two FTE supervisors, 0.7 FTE training officer and a CSU Team Manager.

2.6. Each CSU representative will need to be trained with the relevant skillset to take calls on behalf of a particular service and act as the front of house for that service. This also means being trained on subject matter expertise as well as trained on multiple back-office systems. As a result, different CSU representatives have different skills profiles based on their level of experience.

2.7. When a call is made to the main switchboard, the call is routed through the Integrated Voice Recognition Service (IVR) which seeks to determine what the callers query is in relation to. It then routes the call through to the CSU representative with the correct skills profile for the call. The CSU representative will then answer the call and process the query by logging on to the relevant back-office system.

2.8. Supervisors monitor the quality of the calls and oversee the CSU advisors via a dashboard which highlights how many callers are on the phone and call duration, how many callers are waiting, and call wait times etc.

2.9.   In addition to answering calls that come through the main switchboard, the CSU also operate the reception desk at the Forum, offer face-face appointments to customers where required and respond to and resolve queries that come in via email and social media channels.

3.0   Performance

Performance levels

3.1.   The CSU currently have a target of 300 seconds for call wait time as a Key Performance indicator reported to SLT monthly and to this Overview and Scrutiny Committee on a quarterly basis.

3.2.   Performance against this target has been a challenge for several reasons, namely due to the mismatch between increasing demand levels and the resourcing levels in CSU. Given demand also fluctuates throughout the year, call wait times vary month on month. The target of 300 seconds has been difficult to achieve in Q1 and Q2.

3.3.   Average call wait times for Q1 was 788.67 seconds, well above the target. we have been undertaking several actions to improve performance and reduce call wait times. In Q2, we saw a slight reduction to 611 seconds. Further efforts have allowed us to bring performance levels in Q3 to below target, **with an average call wait time of 257.33 seconds.** The table below below shows the average call wait times across 2023 and indicated that the actions we have been implementing are having an impact on call wait times.
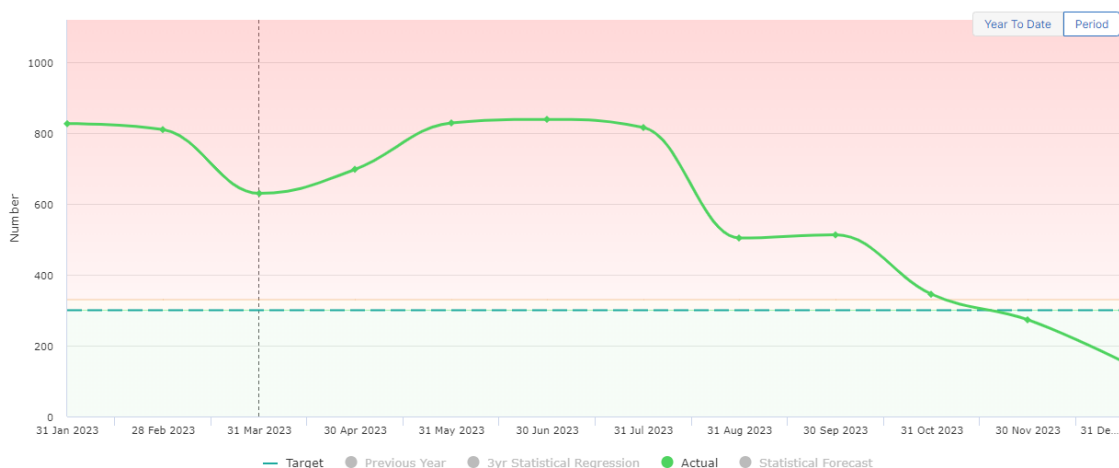
Key Performance Indicator

3.4.   A target of 300 seconds call wait times was set when the service was outsourced to monitor performance of the contractor. Northgate made several staffing reductions when the service was outsourced, and the reduced staffing levels have remained in place when the service was brought back in house.

3.5.   Due to external issues such as cost of living crisis, increased homelessness and central government pushing more responsibilities onto local Government, there has been an increased level of demand on CSU. Due to the lack of self-service options at present, this has resulted in more calls and more customers turning up to the forum with queries and for support.

3.6.   As part of the corporate review of KPIs, we have modelled the call wait times against the maximum staffing profile to understand what is achievable in terms of maximum call wait times with the resourcing profile we currently have against this increasing levels of demand. The outcome from the modelling exercise determined that an average call wait time of 300 seconds was unlikely to be met across the year. We also found that using an average wait time did not

provide a full picture of how long most callers were waiting on the telephone before their call was answered and virtual wait times for those requesting a call back was skewing the average wait times. Using the modelling data, we have therefore suggested a new KPI which will measure our ability to answer 90% of calls within target.

4.0   Actions to improve performance.

Improved service performance

4.1.   In addition to the KPI measuring average call wait times, we have specific operational performance indicators in place to measure performance of each Customer Service representative. This measures average call duration time, with a target of 300 seconds and average wrap up time of 210 seconds (time taken to complete the query or process on the relevant system once the caller hangs up). This means that the quicker we can complete the call and undertake the wrap up activity, the sooner we can answer the next call.

4.2.   Individual performance against these two measures have hugely improved over the last few months, and we have managed to bring the average call duration down to an average of 277 seconds in Q3 and average wrap up time of 89 seconds in Q3, well below target.

4.3.   We have also increased oversight and management of the dashboard to ensure we increase the amount of skills profile for certain services when demand for those subject increases at a particular point in the day. Using the data, we monitor which subject areas have higher call numbers and higher average call duration and we divert skills from subjects with lower demand/lower call durations so we can balance out call wait times. Supervisors are also making themselves available to answer calls if call wait times become too high.

4.4.   There have been instances in the past where call durations are lengthened whilst the CSU representative tries to get hold of back-office teams to respond to queries. This has a knock-on impact on call wait times. To address this, we have established new protocols with back-office services where a 'duty officer' is allocated in the service for CSU staff to seek support for customers and avoid any delays in responding to enquiries.

4.5.   We have also introduced a monthly report to the corporate leadership team (CLT) which includes data on call volumes and call durations. This allows us to flag with services around increased demand in relation to their service and discuss things that can be done in collaboration to reduce the demand levels or how best to ensure call duration is managed. This process also allows us to take a co-ordinated approach to mass communication to residents and customers that could lead to a surge in calls into the CSU, phasing communication so any potential surge is balanced out over a few weeks.

Callback facility

4.6.   We have a call back facility which allows customers to leave their number and their call will be held in a virtual call, once it reaches the top of the queue the system dials the customer and calls them back. This was previously offered up to 2pm to ensure the customer could be called back by the end of the day. Adjustments have made this available to customers over longer periods of the day, allowing call wait times to be reduced and allow customers to continue with their day until their call is returned.

Improvements to the Integrated Voice Recognition System

4.7.   Working with the Transformation team, the IVR system has been reviewed, taking on board customer feedback to improve the customer journey. We have made several changes to the

steps and scripts to allow customers to get through to the relevant service or CSU agent dealing with that service area more quickly and easily. More automation has also been added allowing customers to self-serve and make use of the digital options available to them and avoiding the need to speak with a CSR.

4.8.   In parallel to the IVR work, improvements have also been made to some of the Web pages to direct customers to self-serve easier, again removing the need for them to phone for information they can easily find on the website, and they can then transact at a time that is convenient to them without having to wait on the phone.

Staffing

4.9.   Staffing is a huge challenge in the CSU. Given the CSU representative roles are entry level roles, there is a high level of turnover. A number of CSU staff end up applying for internal roles as they already have subject matter and back-office system experience gained whilst working within the CCU. From October 2022 to October 2023, CSU experienced the equivalent of 32.5% staff turnover, nearly three times as much as the DBC average.

4.10.   To try and mitigate the impact on call wait times, we have looked at recruiting to vacant posts in more creative ways. We have looked at the resourcing profile against customer demand and where appropriate have recruited to different shift patterns e.g. when recent vacancies arose, rather than recruiting to a full-time post, we used these hours to recruit 2 part time Customer Service Representatives to cover the lunchtime periods when calls were busier.

4.11.   We have also created a dedicated training officer role so we can ensure we can increase the skills profile for each CSU representative so they can resolve queries for a wider range of services. This now gives a consistent, planned, and timely training programme for new starters and existing team members to ensure staff can be trained quicker. As a result, calls can be spread more widely across the team. In addition, the training officer is in constant contact with back-office services to understand changes to service processes and systems so that CSU representatives can be brought up to speed quickly which ensures calls are managed more effectively.

Customer Strategy

4.12.   We have been developing our customer strategy programme which seeks to improve overall customer experience, reduce failure demand and avoidable contact, and increase self-service options for customers. This will have a huge impact on call wait times as more customers will either not need to call us or be able to do more without having to call us.

4.13.   As part of this programme, we have been redesigning processes in Revenues and Benefits and launching self-service channels which will make the process more efficient and must faster for customers to process moving in/out of an address and issue refunds where required. This will also help reduce the volume of call into CSU and back office.