

SSDC Telephony Response

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Action required

Members of the Scrutiny Committee are asked to note and comment on the report.

Background

A number of Scrutiny Committee members have experienced long waiting times and had to abandon calls on several occasions when contacting the Council through the main switchboard number 462462. Scrutiny members are concerned that South Somerset residents may be frustrated and disappointed by the apparent lack of responsiveness.

Scrutiny members believe that problems have been experienced over the last 6 months and now the unusual peak of the Election is over they believe that there are still perceived delays in speaking to an advisor.

Specific points and questions posed by Scrutiny Committee

The following points and questions were set by the Scrutiny Committee and brief answers follow. More details about how the ICT team and Customer Focus Manager are working together to address remaining issues is contained later in the report.

Q 1. *To ascertain if there have been any changes in performance levels relating to call answering time by Customer First over the past 12 months.*

Unfortunately, as the main body of the report will explain, there has been no ability to measure the call answering time since November 2014 when the then call management system (MacFarlane) was switched off. Performance in the first quarter 2014-15 was:

- 70.5% calls answered within 30 seconds
- 79.2% calls answered within 60 seconds

While this is slightly below the annual target, it is consistent with performance of previous years as the first quarter is a high demand period.

Q 2 *To consider any suggested cause(s) of the delays in answering the calls.*

Without a functioning Phone Management System it is impossible with certainty to identify any causes. Certainly there have been some unusual workloads (the new electoral system would have been one of these) and we believe that many of those

may be repeat callers or members or officers using the customer contact centre instead of ringing officers directly. The organisation has also started new areas of work, some of which have had a significant impact on the number of calls.

Q 3 *Are there actions that, with the relevant service managers, can rectify the problem to ensure calls are answered in an acceptable time frame to ensure customer satisfaction and prevent excessive costs for those contacting us.*

In order to free up the customer lines for residents' queries we have:

- Produced a key number phone list for councillors so that they do not use the customer lines simply to be put through to specific officers or teams.
- Advised staff that they must not use the customer lines to be put through to a member of staff
- Changed contact details on a number of processes where a direct number is preferable, reducing the load on the customer lines. (An example would be Summons letters)
- Aimed to move as many processes to self service online as possible (see section 3 of the report)

Removing non-customer enquiries from 462462 will help reduce waiting times and customer expense. However, we have also:

- Changed the sound that the customer hears when in the queue from a ring tone to an engaged tone so that we are communicating that we are busy rather than simply letting unattended phones ring without being answered.

Q 4 *Is there an effective measure to capture this information and for it to be presented within the quarterly performance information?*

As soon as we have a functioning new call management system (Mitel) we will return to presenting performance information within the quarterly performance update. Indeed, the new system should give access to a wider range of management information than we had previously.

Q 5 *Have we encountered any problems that have affected the response times?*

Apart from a perceived increase in call numbers there have been a number of technical issues. These are detailed in the main body of the report

Q 6 *Have any steps been identified to help address any such problems and what progress if any has been made to date?*

Significant progress has been made by the ICT team working alongside the contractors and Customer Services Manager. This is detailed in the report but there are still a few outstanding issues. We firmly believe that the situation has improved and there are fewer instances where customers wait for an extended period of time before their call is answered. We are currently unable to provide data on this but the number of customers complaining to advisers has significantly decreased. However, there are still busy periods on the phones (predominately on a Monday morning) and callers will find it takes longer for a call to be answered or they may choose to call at a different time/day.

Q 7 Do we have a target for Customer advisors to answer within a given time? Please explain why and if yes how this target was set?

When the contact centre was set up, the following targets were set in consultation with elected members:

- 80% calls answered in 30 secs
- 90% calls answered in 60 secs

Q 8 Have we done any benchmarking for response times with other authorities and/or other service providers? If yes please provide details.

Other providers are not always willing to share targets for response times. However, personal experience of other providers (public and private sector) would indicate an actual response time which is much slower than our target times. The portfolio holder has indicated that once we have the call management system in place that he would like to reconsider, with Scrutiny, whether these targets are still appropriate.

Q 9 What are the answer times during open hours for the last 6 months in relative detail with peaks and trends explained (greater than 6 months may be provided if this presents a better picture)?

Unfortunately, there is no performance information for this period

Q 10 What are the number of abandoned calls during opening hours for the 6 months.

Unfortunately, there is no performance information for this period

Further information about the Customer Contact Centre service (Customer Focus Manager)

Staffing

We have about 13 full time equivalent (FTE) staff at the moment. This was reduced from 16 in 2009 (19% reduction) and nearly 30 in 2004 when the service was set up. The number of calls however is only 13% less than in 2004.

Working with our new Portfolio Holder (the Leader of the Council) we have recently appointed two fixed term contracts for a period of 6 months. This gives us extra resource whilst the technical issues continue and will alleviate the effects of summer time holiday across the team. Also, as we move staff across to use the new Mitel system this extra resource will help us to maintain performance.

Performance

Scrutiny were heavily involved in driving improvements in the performance of the call centre from 2006-08. Since that time, the numbers of staff have been reduced further while the performance has been maintained, although it is now absolutely on target so any further staff reduction without changing the services provided will cause us to drop below targets.

Target	80% calls answered in 30 secs	90% calls answered in 60 secs
2010/2011	82.80%	92.30%
2011/2012	82.40%	90.20%
2012/2013	79.30%	87.30%
2013/2014	80.60%	90.90%
2014/2015	70.50%*	79.20%*

(*2014/15 data skewed due to phone issues and impossibility of collecting data in recent months)

Customer Satisfaction.

Satisfaction with customer handling remains high. Our target is 90% satisfaction, taken from a random survey of 200 past customers each quarter. Therefore we are getting 800 responses each year. (NB. Not possible at the moment due to no McFarlane call management system - see further information later in the report)

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15*
Target 95%	97.65%	96.40%	95.70%	96.00%	96.00*

(*2014/15 data skewed as has not been possible to collect in recent months)

Whilst unable to complete phone-back surveys we believe customer satisfaction with call handling remains high. Below are excerpts from compliments received in the past month:

- *"Mrs C complimented the contact centre on their good customer services; her exact words were 'you're much better than BT'.*
- *Just a swift mail in praise two of your young ladies who helped me recently. I called on 15/6 and spoke to Caroline and rang again on 29/6 and this time spoke to Joanna. I won't bore you with the details suffice to say both girls were extremely helpful and courteous and my problem was dealt with most efficiently and speedily. My thanks to them both. Look after them - they are rare!*
- *Mrs W phoned on Thursday regarding her garden waste bin. She spoke to a very helpful young lady and she said that it was a boiling hot day but the lady was still very helpful to her. She thought about it over the weekend and thought she should phone in to give her a pat on the back.*
- *Mrs S was very impressed with my efficiency and customer service. She said I was a delight to speak to and a 'breath of fresh air' through the department.*
- *Mrs Pr rang on 15/6/2015 to request two food waste bins for her rental properties in Somerton and Martock - Caroline took this call and Mrs Parker said she was extremely helpful and provided her with all the information she needed. Mrs Parker rang again today (29/6) and spoke to me (Joanna) to inform us that her brown bin still hadn't been delivered. She said that it was a pleasure to talk to me and I was extremely helpful after I reassured her that I would escalate the location of her recycling bins.*
- *I expect you get many grumbles. As an antidote here is some praise: "I ordered a second green bin, which are very useful, on the Wednesday afternoon of the 27th May by your online system. I immediately got a payment receipt and the bin was delivered at around 10.00 a.m. the following day. The reference sticker arrived by post on the Friday."*

Moving to online, self-serve services

This has contributed to the 13% drop in phone calls since 2003 however there is more to be done here via marketing and putting more services online.

Table Three. Online services and usage by customer in Year from 1/6/2014 to 31/5/15				
Service	Phone or in person		Online	
	Number	%	Number	%
GEN - Report Fraud	69	26%	199	74%
GEN - Discover Advert		0%	18	100%
GEN - Complaint	31	11%	264	89%
SWP - Commercial Register	7	16%	43	84%
PLN - Payment	113	46%	135	54%
CAR - Parking Fines	991	48%	1084	52%
REV - Council Tax Payment	28076	54%	24140	46%
SWP - Garden Subscription	5893	54%	4958	46%
REV - Business Rates Payment	461	60%	303	40%
SWP - Garden Sacks	246	61%	155	39%
SWP - Req Containers	5036	61%	3158	39%
GEN - Sundry Debtor Payment	1581	66%	815	34%
REV - Change Bill Name	165	64%	92	36%
REV - Landlord report of tenant change	1566	74%	548	26%
REV - Move In	1362	72%	523	28%
SWP - Missed Collections	4741	77%	1432	23%
SWP - Req Assisted Collection	176	86%	28	14%
REV - Move Out	1590	86%	268	14%
BEN - End IS	140	88%	19	12%
BEN - Change Persons HH	335	91%	33	9%
REV - Move Within	3615	88%	475	12%
BEN - Change Rent	82	93%	6	7%
BEN - Change Income	712	94%	46	6%

Overall Volume of Calls

In 2004 the contact centre took 851 calls per day – averaging 28 per member of staff per day. In 2014 the Contact Centre took 195,300 calls, about 771 per working day – averaging 60 per member of staff per day (neither take into account annual leave!).

Further information about recent technological issues with the phones since the switch to Lync and its effect on the Customer Contact Centre (ICT Manager)

Before July 2014 the contact centre used a Phillips phone system and McFarlane call handling system for Customer Services. However, these were both becoming out of date and there was a related project to change the phone systems across the organisation to Microsoft Lync in order to increase functionality, make savings, improve flexibility and enable the accommodation changes necessary to facilitate SCC moving in. All suppliers were contacted

and advised that everything would work together, however this proved not to be the case and some areas are still being worked upon. See the following timeline.

July 2014 – new Lync phone system rolled out to back office teams (following successful pilot in some teams)

Mid Sept 2014 – Phillips telephone system switched off. Contact centre phones moved to Lync.

End November 2014– back office inability to transfer calls fixed.

End November 2014 – testing without MacFarlane removed a number of problems associated with running Lync and MacFarlane together. Decision made to continue running without Macfarlane, albeit with the loss of the management functionality and information normally available to the Customer Services Manager.

End of December 2014 – The project had intended to run with the Macfarlane Contact Centre until everything had tested ok, but with that proving to be a part of the problems we were experiencing we accelerated the procurement of a new Contact Centre. After due research and consultation a new Contact Centre system was purchased from Mitel.

The current situation:

- call transfers are causing a small number of calls to be cut off i.e. those that are to services to ask a question and then taken back. This happens more frequently when the Contact Centre is really busy. At present calls are not being transferred back to Customer Services to alleviate this.
- calls are cut off sometimes due to duration of call (the call starts as soon as the telephone rings)
- call quality – ‘dalek voice’, and sometimes poor audio generally but investigations have found that this can be down to calls from mobile phones.
- call conferencing is not yet functional so the new Contact Centre (Mitel) cannot yet be activated. This is because the required call conferencing is not currently a feature of the handsets which AudioCodes are working to resolve
- where spot checks have been carried out we have found other factors, rather than our ICT, have come into play on some calls. These include the customer hanging up, issues with mobile phones and problems with the customers telephone
- call volumes are still high leading to queues and some complaints about not getting through although we are now seeing very many more periods where some advisers are waiting for a call
- there have been a number of frustrations as in some cases the fixes from AudioCodes did not always resolve the problems and occasionally when they did, other problems that had previously been masked emerged.
- while we have solved many issues already, we do accept that there are still problems and these are being investigated vigorously.

Officers are currently investigating /implementing:-

- Work with our consultants to ensure that the Lync configuration is correct
- Even greater engagement with Mitel in finding a solution.
- Testing of alternative call transfer processes in an attempt to prevent some of the cut offs.
- Discussing with the Revenues and Benefits Manager whether we can call back a customer should the team not be able to respond to a call from Customer Services within 2 minutes

- ICT analysis of some call duration stats – are we back to the average before the phones or are calls still taking longer than pre Lync. Also is there anything that will show a link between duration and cut off.
 - Bring the area teams back into the call response groups
 - The Customer Focus Manager is testing to see if headsets can be used to bypass the AudioCode phones in the contact centre.
 - Changing the desktop technology from thin clients in the Customer Contact Centre so that we can temporarily bypass the handset related issues in that service which is at the front end of receiving and transferring telephone calls.
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