

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

17 NOVEMBER 2022

**REPORT OF CORPORATE
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

CABINET INFORMATION ITEM

**Access Communities and Community Safety
Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor Norma Stephenson**

CUSTOMER SERVICES DELIVERY UPDATE

SUMMARY

Customer expectations and behaviours have changed significantly in recent years, accelerated by the pandemic. The way people access the Council and interact with services has continued to evolve, with an increasing number choosing on-line channels. The Council has enabled and encouraged this move as it delivers increased efficiency and allows the customer to transact with us from their own home, at times that suit them. Alongside this improvement of digital channels, we have continued to provide people with an opportunity for face-to-face support.

This paper provides an update on Customer Services provision; how people are interacting with us and how we are ensuring that of our residents' needs are met through a dynamic 'right-sizing' approach. This flexible and responsive use of staff and technology has enabled us to handle more queries in total and more per member of staff.

In 2020/21, each individual member of Customer Service front line staff handled an average of 8577 transactions, compared to 7831 in 2019/20.

However, whilst the long-term trend is toward self-serve and digital interactions, recent events linked to COVID recovery and subsequent 'cost of living' pressures, have significantly increased demand for personalised support and advice. The volume and complexity of this demand has resulted in a significant increase in customer call wait times.

This report outlines work that is underway to recruit and train additional front-line Customer Services staff to tackle this problem.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Cabinet is asked to note the Customer Services channel trends and dynamic delivery model.

DETAIL

1. Customer Services is delivered through the following channels:
 - Face to face.
 - Telephone Contact Centre
 - E-mail
 - Online self-serve (Digital)

2. 'Face-to-face' service includes appointments, digital assistance and signposting at Stockton, Billingham and Thornaby Libraries. An appointment system was established during 2018 for the high-volume services, i.e., Revenues, Benefits, Licensing, Blue Badges and Bus Passes. The purpose of this was to improve the efficiency of our support, smooth customer demand across the working day, reduce customer waiting times and avoid overcrowding in the waiting area.
3. Appointments can be made remotely in advance, or by the staff in the Customer Service centres. Capacity is retained in the appointment schedule to accommodate same-day appointments to handle urgent customer requirements. We encourage customers to make an appointment in order to minimise their wait and ensure the information is available to resolve their query efficiently.
4. Face-to-face support typically takes twice as long as phone-based resolution. The staff dealing with face-to-face are diverted from phone lines and, as a consequence, the more face-to-face appointments we accommodate the fewer calls we can answer in the same period.
5. The number of customers requesting a face-to-face visit has dropped substantially compared to pre-pandemic levels. In the first half of 2019/20 we had 26,512 face-to-face enquiries, in the first half of this year we had 3,456, representing a 67% reduction.
6. Of the 3,546 customers that did come into our Customer Service Centres in the first half of this year, 2,471 (71%) we provided with assistance to resolve their needs using our digital online solutions. In other words, we helped them to help themselves.
7. The GOSS digital platform, along with the CIVICA system for Council Tax and Benefits, has enabled the development of more online solutions and new processes that provide customers with services at times that suit them, without the need to telephone or visit a Customer Service centre. For example, online solutions can now enable people to make payments, process application forms or submit evidence.
8. Customer online transactions have increased significantly over the past 3 years with over 200 self-serve solutions currently live and a further 35 in development.

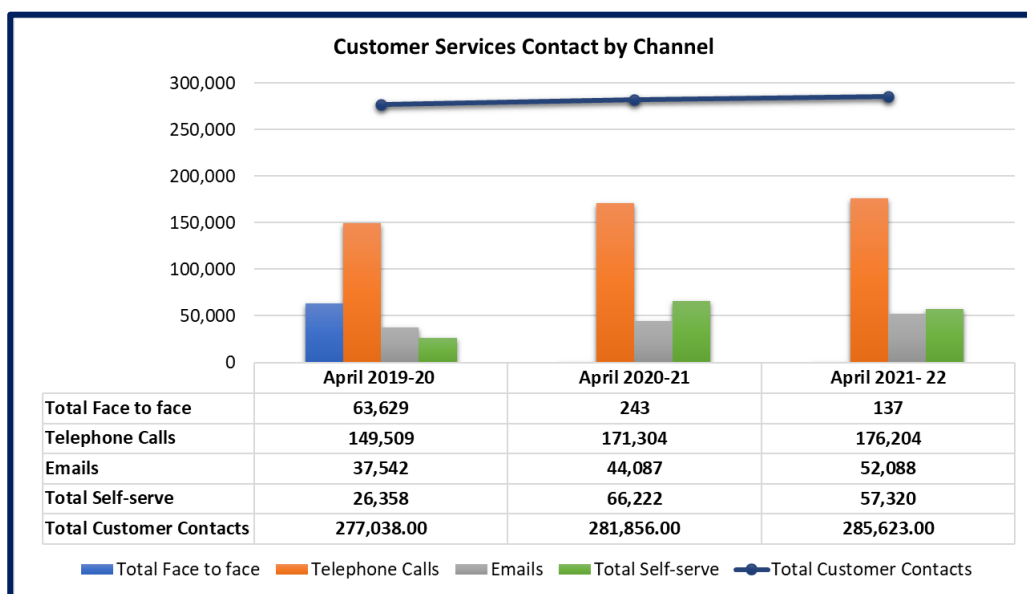


Figure 1 shows customer transactions by channel for the past 3 full years, up to March 2022. This demonstrates an increase in telephone, self-serve and email transactions and a decline in face-to-face contacts compared to pre-pandemic numbers.

NB: The numbers of face-to-face visits in 21/22 and 22/23 are so low that bars do not show up on the graph, however they are available in the table below the graph.

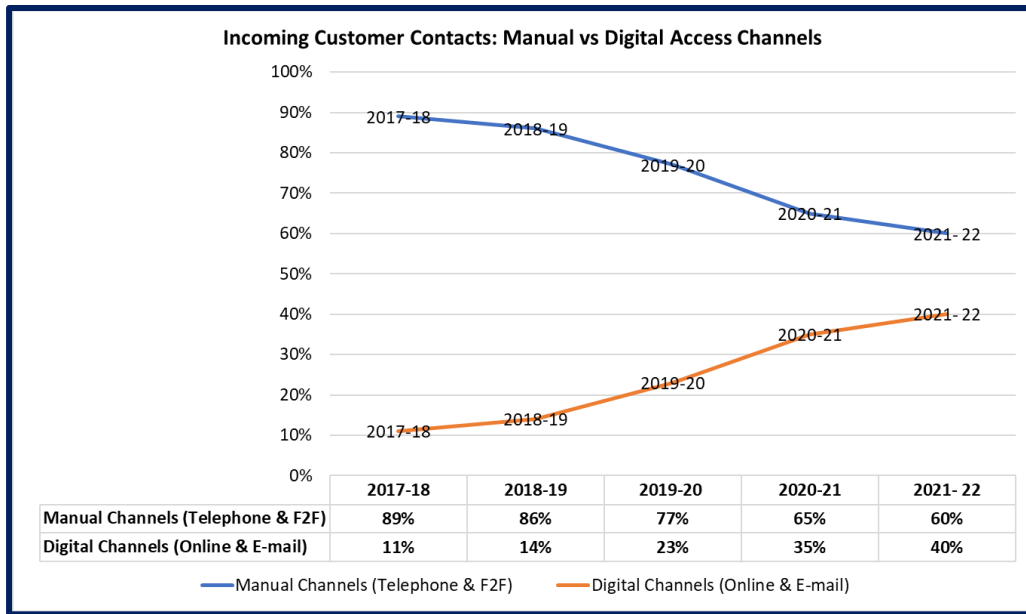


Figure 2 shows inbound customer transactions over the past 5 years and the current year to date, broken down between manual and digital channels as a percentage of all transactions.

- We believe the majority of our customers are migrating to digital solutions because they are convenient and effective. The opportunity for customers to provide feedback is built into the GOSS online services and satisfaction levels are high with **84%** of customers **fairly or very satisfied**.

Very Dissatisfied	Fairly Dissatisfied	Neutral	Fairly Satisfied	Very Satisfied
5%	3%	8%	17%	67%

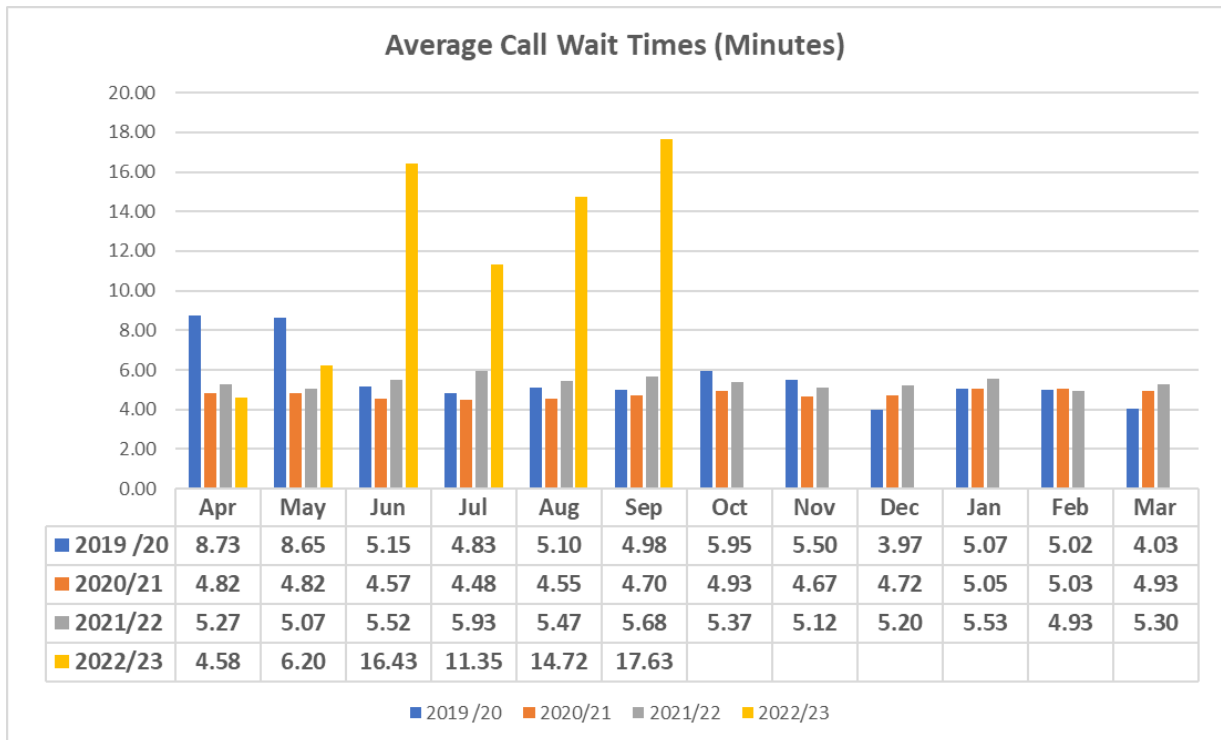
Figure 3 shows the satisfaction ratings from feedback collected between October 21 – July 22. There was 839 responses in total.

- Since 2018, the Customer Services approach has aligned staff deployment to customer demand and service delivery priorities. In practice this has resulted in more staff handling telephone calls and emails and a reduction in the number of staff sitting at customer facing desks within the Customer Service centres. For example, in Stockton centre pre-covid there was an average of 6 – 7 staff on desks each day, currently 2 – 3 is sufficient to meet demand. In Thornaby and Billingham there were previously 2 staff, there is now 1.
- Staffing levels for face-to-face are determined by the number of customers requiring appointments or digital assistance and the need for spare capacity to respond to urgent requirements. Staff take telephone calls from the desks when they are not dealing with face-to-face customers.
- Real time monitoring of demand across all channels is in place and staff are deployed to balance demand and provision. The Netcall system, introduced in September 2020, features dynamic call queue handling and automatic call backs (i.e. customers hold their place in the queue and receive an automatic call back). It also enables staff to manage incoming emails alongside telephone calls. Netcall also allows Managers to monitor staff availability and productivity remotely.
- In 21/22 we handled a total of 285,623 transactions across all channels, a 3% increase over 2019/20. Front line staff handled an average of 8,577 each in 21/22 compared to 7,831.30 in 2019. The 2021/22 increase was achieved whilst staff were working from home.

The effects of COVID recovery and 'cost of living' pressures

14. In the immediate aftermath of the pandemic there was a backlog of work resulting from procedures being paused, such as Council Tax debt recovery and Bus Pass or Blue Badge renewal. This placed significant strain on a number of teams and staff were redeployed to boost capacity in Customer Services and Revenues and Benefits.
15. By way of illustration, the average number of Debt Recovery summons per month pre-pandemic was c1200. For the 3 months August to October 2022 that reached nearly 1700 per month.
16. In relation to Blue Badges and Bus Passes, in the period April to September 2019, we handled 13,100 customer contacts, for the same period in 2022 we received 20,600 contacts, representing a 36% increase in volume.
17. This increase in activity associated with postponed or deferred processes was anticipated and although it was significant it was expected to be short term.
18. In addition to these pressures, the national £150 energy grant scheme administration generated a significant volume of unexpected work. In May this year we issued 27000 letters inviting people to apply for the support, and in the period between May and September we handled nearly 6000 contacts relating to energy grants.
19. In normal circumstances we have sufficient capacity to handle approximately 1,300 Customer enquiries per week for Council Tax and Benefits services. The combination of Energy Grant applications and Council Tax recovery increased enquiries to around 2,100 per week.
20. The current cost-of-living pressures on our communities are also now impacting on Customer Service demand levels. Staff across our teams are spending more time with customers, helping them gain additional support or realign their financial arrangements. This added complexity has significantly increased call durations, which can have a disproportionate effect on wait times. The average duration of each call (across all services) has increased by approximately 50%. In the period from June to September 2022 the average call was 9 minutes long, compared to less 6 minutes for the same period in 2019.

Figure 5 shows monthly average wait times in minutes for the past 3 years (the April and May 2020 spikes were due to COVID).



21. The combined effect of these factors has been to produce an increase in average call wait times in the period since May 2022, from a long-term average of 5 minutes to 18 minutes average in September, leaving lots of callers frustrated and unable to get through.
22. Customer Services and Revenue Benefits & Welfare have reviewed capacity and resilience in relation to unplanned surges in demand. All available resources have been focused on supporting our residents. The staff in these teams have worked under sustained pressure for many months, often dealing with anxious and agitated residents who are in difficult situations.
23. The expertise and training required for staff dealing with these complex enquiries, makes short-term and rapid increases in capacity very difficult. During the initial period of increased demand we redirected staff and deferred other work. In addition, the Customer Service team is now in the process of recruiting and training 3 additional call handlers capable of supporting the most complex cases.
24. It is expected that this recruitment will have a substantial impact on call-wait times and on our customer’s experiences. Based on current demand and typical figures for each call handler, the additional staff should reduce the call wait times to between 6 to 8 minutes.
25. We will continue to monitor the volume and types of calls we receive and would expect to be able to reduce staffing levels in the future, as the circumstances for our most vulnerable residents improve.

Name of Contact Officer: Lorraine Dixon
Post Title: Assistant Director, Customer and Digital Services
Telephone No. 01642 526283
Email Address: lorraine.dixon@stockton.gov.uk