



Customer Service - Housing Contact:

For consideration by: Housing Scrutiny Commission

Date: 30th January 2017

Lead director: Alison Greenhill

Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: All
- Report author: Alison Musgrove
- Author contact details: 0116 454 2642

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 To provide the Scrutiny Commission with an overview of Housing contact for the Tenants Advice and Repairs Service (TARS).
- 1.2 This report will reflect customer activity for the period January 2016 until December 2016 as requested by the Housing Scrutiny Commission and explain the future channel shift opportunities for tenant customer interaction.

2. Summary

An overview of the Housing customer Contact offer

2.1 The customer contact route is predominately through telephony call handling with a hub and spoke approach to face to face contact with a City Centre offer on Granby Street along with seven geographically based multi service hubs following the Transforming Neighbourhood Services programme to introduce the Customer Service on line offer in key locations, in areas of deprivation (predominately housing estates), where possible, across the city.

2.2 The City Councils call centre receives approximately 65,000 – 70,000 calls a month for 15 Council services of which Housing is one service, approximately 26% of these are from Housing. The call centre takes calls from 8am to 6pm every week day and for Saturday only Housing Repairs, management and rent; from 8.00am to 1pm.

2.3 The caller waits for approximately 5:49 minutes for the call to be answered - our target is for 90% of calls to be answered within 2 minutes, and we take on average 6 minutes to handle a call. Callers listen to welcome messages for approximately 1 minute, after this 13% of calls are abandoned – our corporate target is to minimise the loss of calls to 10%.

2.4 Revenues & Customer Support Service operate the Councils call centre with 57 staff in the establishment, of which there are 4 management posts.

2.5 The telephony service is funded utilising the following resources for 2016/17:

	£
General Fund	497,000
Housing Revenue Account (HRA)	<u>791,000</u>
	1,388,600

2.6 Customer Services have contributed £0.5m in savings over 2015 -2017 including £200k to the Transforming Neighbourhood Services savings inclusive of £66k savings from the HRA for the outreach face to face provision from 2017/18.

2.7 The Revenues and Customer Support service took management of the service in

June 2014 and have been looking at ways in which to improve the telephone experience to achieve best value and the experience for the caller. This includes the introduction of a performance management regime, regular 1:1's with agents, more focussed and targeted management of absence. Management information has been refreshed and performance targets introduced, for waiting times, abandonment rates, call handling times and customer feedback expectations'

2.8 Through this call centre a tenant can call to book a housing repair, report an estate management issue (e.g. Anti-Social Behaviour), or request a tenant initiated improvement (Housing management), make a payment to or manage their rent account (Rent Enquiries) Housing Options general enquiries and initial homelessness enquiries (tier 2) for Housing Options are handled by Revenues and Customer Support's customer service line.

2.9 The customer service face to face offer was delivered at three outreach locations in addition to the main Customer Contact Centre at Granby Street. These are detailed in the table below. The on-line offer is available throughout the locations operating hours, greatly extending the opportunity for tenants and customers to transact with the council via computer or by free phone on weekdays.

Transforming Neighbourhood Services Customer service changes		
Location	Operated over Days a week	Transferred to Customer Services on line
New Parks Library	5	Reopened - December 2016
Merlyn Vaz Health Centre	2	Venue changed to St Matthews community library from May 2016
Saffron Lane Housing Office	3	Venue changed to Pork Pie Community library from December 2015
New Customer Service on-line locations		
Beaumont Leys library		January 2017

2.10 Historically, tenants had not been encouraged to self-serve until the introduction of the Choice Based Lettings system whereby 97% of housing applications are now made on line on a self-serve basis completed by the prospective tenant. This indicates that tenants are capable of using technology. However Customer Services staff continued to deliver most housing services on a face to face basis regardless of whether the tenant wanted or needed this, whether they were able to do it for themselves or not. During 2015/16, in a lot of instances, Customer Service staff began to sign post tenants to the free phone to call the telephony line for all housing contact where they thought this was appropriate to do. During 2015/16 3,756 customers were helped at these locations and 387 in 2016/17. The locations of Housing Customer Service has changed significantly during 2016 as part of the Council's accommodation strategy completing in December 2016 with a single customer contact centre in the city centre.

2.11 This level of customer contact by telephone has been a challenge in 2016. In order to understand housing customer contact performance it is important to look at the service provision and the channel shift programme.

3. Service background

3.1 In 2012 with the governance of the Organisational Development & Improvement team, Customer Services undertook to deliver a wider range of council service customer contact. This included Housing repairs, Housing management, rent arrears contact and Revenues and Benefits general enquires. Customer Services used the combined funding from three sources (existing Customer Service Line budget, Housing funding and Revenues & Benefit budget) to manage the increased call handling demand and create a training and service improvement team. The argument being a combined centre would and has delivered economies of scale to realise efficiency.

3.2 Before May 2011 Housing repairs, management and arrears calls were receiving approximately 222,000 calls per annum, 73.84% were answered, leaving an average abandonment rate of 26.2%.

3.3 The organisational review undertaken in 2012 created the call centre with 57 staff in the establishment, of which there are 4 managers. Following the review, a Service Level Agreement (below) was introduced and has remained unchanged. This forms the basis for the monthly performance targets and subsequent meeting discussions.

Management information & performance indicators	Target where applicable	Current performance against target*
Percentage of calls abandoned	No more than 5%	
Average wait time	60 seconds	6 minutes
Customer satisfaction levels for TARS	80%	89.41%

*All Housing contacts including Housing Options.

3.4 In January 2015 the Housing Options Service (HOS) moved from its separate location in Phoenix House to York House. The face to face provision transferred into the Customer Service Centre. In 2015/16 HOS call handling operated a telephone service for on average 26 hours a week. In this time they answered 41% of calls; with 13% abandoning calls and 46% of contact being redirected to a message answering service. On investigation it was found that 2,000 calls were sitting in this message answering service and had not been called back. The calls to Housing Options were absorbed into the customer service line without an additional transfer of budget therefore without increased levels of agents to answer them. In doing so the caller to Housing Options can now get through over a longer period (50 hours per week) because the call lines are open throughout the week compared to 26 hours previously (Mon – Thursday 8.30 to 5pm, no service Tuesday am, Friday 9am to 4.30pm). There is no service level agreement in place for HOS call handling.

3.5 During the last 2 years a number of services have had their calls transferred into the call centre, these include:

- Housing options
- School admissions
- Electoral Services

3.6 Increased levels of agents have not been employed to cover these extra services as call volumes should be manageable within the service establishment however the

agent's numbers have not reached establishment numbers until very recently, individual performance of agents and management of absence has proven to be a challenge for the service. This has had a direct result on call handling across all services not just the housing calls.

4. Current Service delivery performance, challenges and solutions-

2016 Housing calls performance:

4.1 We received 258,651 calls for all four areas of housing business (being Housing Repairs, Housing Management, Housing arrears and Housing Options). This represents 26% of all the call the centre receives. Detailed analysis of call management can be found in appendix B.

4.2 Average call performance was:

- we answered 205,795 of all the calls,
- the caller waited approximately 6 minutes for the call to be answered, and
- we take on average 5.41 minutes to handle a call.
- callers abandon their call in 9% of calls after the welcome messages have ended.

Abandonment of calls December 2015 to December 2016						
Priority lines	Target 2016	Q3 2015/16	Q4 2015/16	Q1 2016/17	Q2 2016/17	Q3 2016/17
Housing Options Homelessness Duty Line	Corporate 10%	11%	16%	11%	21%	12%
Housing Repairs Customer Service Agent	SLA 5%	5%	9%	3%	5%	2%

4.3 Improved call handling has been achieved through changing the priority line called "queue jump" from the housing management line in November 2016 and being applied to the Tier 2 Housing Options line. This was recommended by Housing Services due to the nature of these calls being an emergency and it was felt the resources should be focused here. The Housing Options Tier 2 calls about homelessness and duty to house enquires now wait 3 minutes less to have their call answered (down from 11 minutes to 8 minutes) and more callers got through as the abandonment rate fell from 21% to 13% and continues to do so. This was implemented and evidence shows that although the Housing Management average wait to have their call answered increased to 2.35 mins in November and abandonment rate increased to 12% for tenants calling about anti-social behaviour or handing your notice to quit the tenancy.

Abandonment of calls December 2015 to December 2016						
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	Target 2016	Q3 2015/16	Q4 2015/16	Q1 2016/17	Q2 2016/17	Q3 2016/17
Housing Repairs	SLA 5%	17%	26%	15%	33%	18%
Housing Management		30%	36%	5%	6%	11%
Payments & Rent Enquiries		23%	28%	23%	32%	22%
Housing Options Initial Contact		16%	21%	16%	33%	24%

4.4 This performance does not in most occasions meet the Corporate or Service Level Agreement targets. However various improvements have been put in place which is reversing this trend and performance is now improving over the past quarter.

4.5 There have been a number of challenges the customer call centre has faced which have adversely affected performance during the year however some have offered opportunities. I will explain the issues.

Agent resources and performance

4.6 The call centre has an establishment of 53 FTE call agents, handles calls for 15 services, 3 new services (mentioned previously) have joined the call handling regime since 2015;

- The levels of agents within the establishment have fluctuated from 43 agents to current levels of 52 from December 2016. On average we have 36.5 agents handling calls any one time before recruitment completed in December 2016.
- Northgate Housing administration system went live early January 2016 - with all the associated training and embedding of the new system as our agents directing input data into this system on behalf of Housing. This added between 1.5 and 2 minutes to our call handling time this reducing the numbers of customer calls we are able to answer and we recovered to our previous performance by April 2016.
- The Customer relationship management system was replaced at the end of January 2016 with all the associated training and embedding of the new system.
- The channel shift programme has shifted council tax and housing benefit contact from face to face to telephony, the programme for 2017/18 is to shift this contact from telephone to on line transactions.
- Short term and long absence has been managed down from 10 % to a current absence level of 4% over this calendar year. This means more agents are at work working.
- Between June and August 2016 8 agents resigned from the service which significantly reduced operating capacity.
- We have recruited to 10 vacancies; some agents are recruited to work during peak operating hours to focus resources where they are needed.
- We train new starters on the high demand lines which includes Housing repairs to ensure this contact has resilience in the centre.
- We have an improvement plan in place from November 2016. This focusses on:
 - Increasing resources
 - Advising callers of service expectations to reduce repeat contact
 - Improving Housing processes to minimise repeat contact
 - Exploring a call back facility when the call volume is high
 - Exploring the on-line forms back office integration possibilities

- Reviewing the SLA and introducing SMART performance targets
- Monitoring the plan internally by both services and report outcomes to the Executive Lead member on a monthly basis. See appendix B
- Ensuring robust performance measures are in place in the customer services call centre to meet agreed SLA target

4.7 Callers who wish to make a payment are now served by the automated payment line. This handled 2,743 payments in the last six months totalling £492,461.83. Housing services piloted this services for three months to ensure collection resilience, this was proven and the line was rolled out permanently from 1st October 2015

4.8 Appendix B shows the improvement in housing calls since January 2016; however these still fall short of the SLA set in place when the calls were transferred into the call centre.

Improvements made over the last quarter

4.9 It is important to note that we have currently been working to improve the call handling of the centre and looking at the housing combined data on page 3 of Appendix B this shows the improvement that has been made since October 2016.

4.10 In October the average wait time for a call to be answered was 8 minutes and 34 seconds, recruitment of officers was completed at the end of October, in November the average wait time was reduced to 6 minutes and 26 seconds and reduced again in December to 2 minutes 18 seconds. This is a drop in waiting time of 6 minutes and 16 seconds.

4.11 The abandonment rate has also improved from 28% in October to 7% in December a marked improvement.

4.12 The number of calls answered in 3 minutes increased from 16% in October to 57% in December.

4.13 It is therefore clear to see with the increased staffing and training staff on handling housing calls a marked improvement has been shown, we will continue to work with the Housing Transformation Team to improve processes from the back office to ensure the call handling continues to improve.

4.14 The improvement plan highlights the work that we are concentrating on from both customer services and housing perspective to continue with this improvement over the coming months.

Customer Satisfaction

4.15 We measure overall customer contact satisfaction; the broad corporate target is 85% satisfied.

Customer Contact Survey Results			
Contact route	2015/16		
	Their enquiry was resolved	Either very satisfied or satisfied with their wait time	Either very satisfied or satisfied by the officer's service

Telephony	82.05%	81.26%	99.12%
	2016/17		
Telephony	89.41%	87.19%	94.13%

4.16 In order to continue to improve and meet revised performance targets for call handling it is imperative to move contact onto an integrated on line solution. At present a customer can report a repair and two management reporting change forms through “MyAccount” on-line, however the process remains manually intensive in the back office as call centre staff continue to upload the information onto the Northgate system. This process although appears to be on line for the customer is not. The aim is to implement a self-service portal so that when customers report a repair/change on line the data auto populates the Northgate system without the need for a human resource.

4.17 Some key self-serve objectives to reduce telephone calls are:

- Tenants can view their rent balance on line
- Tenants can view when they need to pay their next rent payment and how much this should be.
- Tenants can apply to pay by Direct Debit on line
- Tenants are informed by email of their repair request; view its progression, comment upon its completion where there are any remaining (snagging) issues.
- Tenants can report a range of estate management related issues online.

5. Current Service delivery – Face To Face

5.1 The Customer Contact Centre saw 152 callers at Granby Street in November 2016 with their council housing enquiries. The housing transactions are low volume and represent about 10% of the face to face activity these are customers requiring the Housing Options Service.

5.2 If tenants call at the Customer Service Centre site on Granby Street they will be offered the opportunity to use the MyAccount facility, if appropriate; or sign posted to the phones for all other transactions. There are 8 PC’s (for Leicester HomeChoice applications) and 12 phones which are free to use. An assisted self-serve scanning facility for HOS application document verification is also available. Tenants can pay their rent by card or cash at our two payment points. During 2016 they paid £258,361 rent by card and £265,145 in cash at the machines. Should a customer wish to see a Customer Service advisor to query an outstanding issue we aim to see 90% of customers within a 10 minute wait. **Appendix B** shows the performance against this target.

5.3 Housing Options customers use the telephones for initial HOS service. Tier 1 calls such as HomeChoice guidance and Housing register enquires are handled by the call centre with Tier 2 being homelessness enquires of which 33% of these are transferred to Duty Officers in the Housing Options Service.

5.4 Housing Options offer pre booked appoints within the centre to deal with duty assessments and on-going housing applications (non-emergency). They saw 495 applicants in 2016 with an average waiting time of 51 minutes.

5.5 The centre has steadily improved on meeting the waiting time targets in key area during the calendar year and achieved this target in November on the housing verification transactions counters, however due to the nature of housing options enquiries it is very difficult to reach this target as the service is reactive to the needs of customers and the immediacy of the need.

5.6 **Channel Shift** - Housing service contact needs to be brought into the modern business environment. Our customers want to transact with us on-line which is available, 24/7. Customer Service snap shot data from the New Parks Library in 2015 shows 60% of tenants present there had access to a PC or smart phone, 92% of Housing Benefit claims are made on line with the vast remainder applying for HB in hostel accommodation. For the past four years about 8% of HB customers have HB awards, in the private sector, paid direct to their landlord demonstrating they are able to pay their rent; compared to other large authorities where the figure is around 25%. We know our customers are IT aware, they have the equipment to transact with us or if they don't we will have provided for them in over 10 locations across the city. If they struggle to do this both Adult learning and the MoneywisePlus offer in the city will support them, even where there are language barriers to get on-line.

5.7 In the modern age of communication demand for a personal service on a person to person basis is no longer cost effective for the Council or required by the vast majority of our customer. As such the Council must make sure the on line offer is responsive, intuitive, straight forward and quicker. Pre-booked appointments will remain available for those who require this service but will manage and assist in reducing the remaining demand to be managed within reduced resources.

6. Recommendations

- The Housing and Customer Service management continue work to achieve improvements through the improvement plan.
- The Housing Scrutiny commission are invited to comment on the customer contact performance for the face to face and call handling service to tenants.
- Housing Services, supported by the Customer Contact Transformation Team, work closely with a software supplier to deliver an integrated on line offer at the earliest opportunity.
- Review the SLA, agree priority focus of resources and set SMART and different targets for call handling for all 4 Housing Service calls
- Work with tenant group to establish their acceptable levels of performance
- Report back to Housing Scrutiny Commission every 6 months with current performance and improvements made

7. Financial, Legal and other implications

7.1 Financial implications

The 'channel shift' agenda towards greater use of on-line self-service (or otherwise telephone contact) is key to delivering efficiencies and cost savings to the Housing Revenue Account and General Fund budgets - Colin Sharpe, Head of Finance, ext. 37 4081

7.2 Legal implications

There are no implications arising directly from the recommendations of this report.

Emma Horton, Head of Law (Commercial, Property & Planning) etc. 37 1426

7.3 Climate Change and Carbon Reduction implications

Through the use of Channel Shift the environmental impact of customer contact will be reduced, particularly by reducing the need to travel.

- Mark Jeffcote, Environment Team (x37 2251)

7.4 Equalities implications

Equalities considerations regarding contact with the housing services mentioned in the report tend to focus on ensuring access that meets people's needs because of their protected characteristics, or ensuring that there are no barriers in place that preclude their receipt of intended benefits/outcomes arising from contact with the service. The report discusses volume of contact and abandoned calls, but does not comment on adverse impacts experienced by callers because of these statistics – what was the impact of all those abandoned calls? There is a lack of evidence to determine whether there are any negative equalities implications arising from service performance. Our Public Sector Equality Duty requires us to pay due regard to any negative impacts arising from our decisions (and this would include decisions on how we deliver our services) and put in place mitigating actions to reduce or remove those negative impacts. Unfortunately, the evidence presented in the report does not consider such implications. A broader perspective, collecting evidence on outcomes as well as performance indicators, would enable us to consider our Public Sector Equality Duty implications.

Irene Kszyk, Corporate Equalities Lead, ext 374147.

8. Supporting information / appendices

None

9. Is this a private report (If so, please indicated the reasons and state why it is not in the public interest to be dealt with publicly)?

No.

10. Appendices

Appendix A – Improvement plan

Appendix B – Call handling for period January 2016 until December 2016

11. Is this a “key decision”?

No