



To:
Councillor Andrea Lewis
Cabinet Member for Service
Transformation

Please ask for: Scrutiny
Gofynnwch am:

Direct Line: 01792 636292
Llinell
Uniongyrochol:

BY EMAIL

e-Mail scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk
e-Bost:

Date 7 March 2024
Dyddiad:

Summary: This is a letter from the Customer Contact Scrutiny Working Group to the Cabinet Member for Service Transformation. The letter concerns the meeting held on 23 February 2024. A response is required by 28 March.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

On the 23 February, a Scrutiny Working Group was held to look at the issue of Customer Contact. We are grateful to Sarah Lackenby, Head of Digital and Customer Services and Liz Shellard, Web Development Manager for attending.

We were given an overview of the Council's performance and plans for developing customer contact channels, an update on customer contact transformation projects and the new Customer Contact Strategic Framework. We heard that there has been a steady decrease in calls and face to face contact in favour of online communication. The officer provided call handing data including abandoned calls and information on face to face contact. Additionally, we received an update on digital inclusion and the digital transformation programme.

Abandoned Calls

We discussed abandoned calls and the experience of being unable to get through to the relevant department once transferred. The officer updated us on the progress with this issue with actions to improve performance being rolled out immediately with a target of reducing abandoned calls by 20% by the end of March assuming staff capacity remains the same. These actions include voice mails where appropriate, a nearly complete data cleanse of directory numbers, and emails sent to staff to keep directory entries accurate online. The officer did highlight that it is difficult to monitor calls that are transferred to a mobile phone or voicemail. We asked whether officers will have the ability to divert phones to computers and heard that this is being looked at over the next 18 months as part of the Improving Customer Access Programme.

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GUILDHALL, SWANSEA, SA1 4PE / NEUADD Y DDINAS, ABERTAWE, SA1 4PE

www.swansea.gov.uk / www.abertawe.gov.uk

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We asked if the transfer of landline to mobile phones works in all cases and heard that this is also being checked, with communication to staff encouraging them to test their own phone lines. We asked if it was possible to automatically update internal directories when changes occur, the officer informed us that this is also being investigated.

Automated Switchboard

The report refers to 23% of calls through the automated switchboard containing grammar unknown, we asked for more information on this and heard that this relates to background noises, conversational fillers or incorrect name of officer or department and that each one is listened to for further improvements with the option of speaking to someone also available.

Complaints

Regarding complaints we were pleased to hear that formal complaints on call handling systems are relatively low, however as Councillors we often receive complaints and requests for help with making contact. We particularly highlighted complaints about parking tickets and also resident parking permits, where constituents have been unable to complete the online permit application and have then been unable to contact an officer who can assist them. We heard that parking ticket contact is limited to appeals and payment and this is being discussed with the head of service. We asked if the Jabber system is it for purpose due to the number of emails received stating that the system is down, we heard that there was a period in 2022/2023 when there were some outages due to system transitioning however since then then system down time will relate to security updates and planned upgrades.

Future Plans and Projects

The three projects relating to the Improving Customer Access Programme were discussed and we asked what the timescales were for these. We heard that the Swansea Account is already live with plans to integrate more services onto this as well as automation of processes and routine transactions in the next two years and a new telephone platform developed over the next 18 months.

We asked for an update on the draft Inclusion Strategic Framework and heard that due to the Audit Wales report on digital inclusion in Wales it has taken a new direction and now sits with Tackling Poverty and Prevention. We were encouraged to hear of the support offered to residents who are not online. We heard about the work of the Tackling Poverty and Prevention Team in supporting digital inclusion but also that contact centre staff can help fill out forms in person or over the phone or provide a paper copy if one is available, this service is also offered in libraries.

Whilst we recognise the benefits of the Customer Charter and Service Standards we asked what checks will be in place to make sure officers are abiding by the charter to monitor it is making a difference. The officer informed us that there will be communication prior to it going live on 1 April and after this monitoring will be carried out once systems and processes are in place.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the briefing received and questions asked we held a discussion on progress and made the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. We were reassured that work is being carried out to check that officers phone numbers are correct, and landlines are being diverted to mobiles correctly to improve the ability to get hold of relevant officers. We request that contact and reminders continue to be made with departments to maintain this.
2. We are aware that work is being carried out to improve out of office messages. We would like to see all internal messages include an accurate return date not just "I am out of the office" and for external out of office messages to include another email address to contact in their absence. If this contact is an individual, it should also be checked that they are not also out of the office.
3. We wish to note that people with hearing impairments struggle to differentiate between the number two and three. It is therefore important that these are clearly spoken in any recorded or automated messages.
4. We suggested the use of a phone queue system that informs the caller where they are in the queue. The officer informed us that this is currently in use on the environmental health line with a view to rolling this out further. We will therefore monitor this as part of our follow up with the Scrutiny Performance Committee.
5. We recommended using a call back option to avoid people being held in a queue for too long. The officer reported this has also been requested by housing benefit and council tax call centres and will be part of the new telephony system being brought in at the end of 2024. We will therefore monitor this progress.
6. We request that as agreed, all staff are made aware of the Customer Charter and Standards, and checks are put in place to ensure that it is being adhered to.
7. We request that officers add to automated response messages following a resident enquiry via email or web to include how long a response may take, in line with the new service standards, this should also be added to online forms. This will reduce unnecessary further contacts to chase for a reply. Whilst we are aware residents will be able to check progress on a request via a Swansea account, this will take several years to develop and build up user numbers.
8. We heard that sickness levels can impact customer contact services. We would like to know the current percentages of short and long term sickness rates.
9. We request information on face to face usage of local housing offices. How many residents are using these and what are they using them for.
10. We request an update from the Tackling Poverty and Prevention Team regarding progress on the digital inclusion strategic framework and the new tackling poverty strategy.
11. We request the use of the word "residents" where possible, if this needs to reflect businesses as well could "customers and residents" be used to avoid calling members of the public "customers" of council services.

Your Response

We are interested in hearing your thoughts about the issues raised in this letter and would ask that you respond to the points in our conclusions by 28 March.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Peter Black

Convener, Scrutiny Working Group – Customer Contact

✉ cllr.peter.black@swansea.gov.uk