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Swansea Council

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Councillor P. Black
Convener, Scrutiny Working Group –
Customer Contact

(By Email)

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Our Ref: AL/JG
Your Ref:
Date:

11 April 2024

Dear Councillor Black,

**Re: Scrutiny Letter to Cabinet Member for Service Transformation dated 7 March
(Customer Contact Working Group - 23 Feb)**

Thank you to the Scrutiny Customer Contact Working Group for giving us the opportunity to discuss this area of our work and the improvement plan.

I have responded below to each of the conclusions and recommendations made by the Working Group:

- 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.**

I agree with this recommendation and can confirm we are working on a series of communications to ask services to review their current set up. With regard to the automated switchboard, which was discussed in the meeting, I have shared some audio files of calls which failed to be transferred by way of example.

- 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.**

I agree with this recommendation and can confirm we are working on a series of communications and advice to staff around their out of office messages, including how to maintain personal and cyber security as they can become a target for criminals. We have updated the guidance available to staff on Staffnet and provided text staff can cut and paste into their messages as well as the Welsh translation. Staff have been advised that external out of office messages should include generic contact details (where



possible) to ensure we have ongoing support available and to lower the risk of identifying an individual who could become targeted as part of a cyber attack.

- 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.**

Thank you for this feedback and staff are researching solutions to improve this for recorded or automated messages both now and for the new system.

- 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.**

I agree with this recommendation and can confirm this functionality has already been rolled out further to Council Tax in the last few weeks.

- 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.**

I agree with this recommendation and can confirm queue call back functionality is being included as a requirement in the new system.

- 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.**

A series of internal communications are underway for the next few months to embed the Charter and Standards. Services were involved in their development so this will be reminding and reinforcing the new ways of working which everyone is already signed up to. Following this activity some mystery shopping will be undertaken to gauge how the implementation is progressing.

- 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.**

I agree with this recommendation, we will be adding all the service standard timescales to automated responses, so residents know when to expect delivery of a service, reducing the need for residents to call the Council.

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.

Sickness, annual leave, and where services are struggling to fill vacancies can all impact call handling. In the corporate call centre for 2023-24 short term sickness as % of our total staff resources was 1.69%. Long term sickness was 4.79% however this has improved in the current year as we no longer have staff on long term sickness.

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?

The Housing Service manages circa 13,700 tenancies within the city. Housing tenancy and estate management services are delivered via 4 operational areas, North, West, East and Central. The North, East and Central areas each have one area office base, located in Blaenymaes, Morrision and Townhill respectively. The West Area operates from the Sketty office and Gorseinon library hub. Services are funded from the housing revenue account, therefore paid for through rental income.

Each office provides a front-line service to tenants accessing housing services and more generally they act as a conduit for residents accessing other Council services, achieved through signposting and advice.

All area housing offices open daily and enquiries at the reception desks are dealt with by Housing Advisors (HAs), additionally HAs handle telephone calls, give advice and take rent and council tax payments. As well as first point of contact duties a primary role of HAs is to undertake a wide range of administrative and support duties for the area housing office team.

The Housing Service has not routinely recorded footfall, it has however been doing so since July 2023 therefore providing 3 quarters of footfall data. There is no comparative monitoring for previous years.

Data linked to telephone calls cannot be analysed as the JABBA system has limited monitoring capability, as a service it was decided not to record this information manually. The Housing Service is currently introducing the Finesse telephone system which will provide monitoring capability and modernise the telephony service.

As well as the front-line reception service, tenants access services in a variety of ways including speaking directly with Neighbourhood Officers, this is a two-way process and data is not collected, the service considers this to be normal business activity.

The types of enquiries include:

Housing Enquiries	General Enquiries
Tenancy changes, wide requests of requests	Council tax, handing in and scanning forms
End of tenancy notifications, including deaths	Housing benefit forms, handing in and scanning forms
Service requests, to see a Neighbourhood Officer etc.	Purchase of garden waste bags
Repairs	Waste caddy requests
Collecting keys, internal/external customers	Scanning documents to other sections
Fly-tipping on housing land	Council tax payments
ASB and nuisance	Advice on how to access Council services
Neighbour complaints/nuisance	Fly-tipping non housing land

Housing Enquiries	General Enquiries
Councillors dropping in	
Rent arrears advice/enquiries	
Re-housing/waiting list enquiries	
Providing paperwork and additional information	
Signposting to other housing services including homelessness/tenancy support/housing partnership team	

Footfall in the area housing offices for the quarter's 2, 3 & 4 2023/24 is as follows:

Footfall at AHOs	East	West		North	Central*	
Q2 2023/24		Sketty	Gors		Town Centre	Townhill
Housing enquiry	416	261	208	630	254	556
Other Council enquiry	364	90	106	565	129	619
Payments	427	121	34	547	226	487
Q3 2023/24						
Housing enquiry	287	292	189	385	194	520
Other Council enquiry	261	58	51	328	126	685
Payments	368	122	5	387	160	480
Q4 2023/24						
Housing enquiry	438	353	211	464	210	557
Other Council enquiry	410	69	79	310	165	823
Payments	304	148	12	343	194	489
		1514	895		1658	5216
Total	3275		2409	3959		6874

* Town Centre closed on 5th April 2024 with services transferring to Townhill

Footfall figures collated within the Housing Service are recorded manually by Housing Advisors.

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.

Although the tackling Poverty Service Manager was unable to attend the Scrutiny meeting, he is very happy to provide a separate update to the Committee on the Council's Digital Inclusion work, either in writing or in person. This will follow as a separate briefing, and I have been advised that the Officer has already been in touch with Members of the Committee to take this forward.

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.

I agree with this recommendation, and we will endeavour to incorporate this wording moving forward. We will issue communications to staff asking everyone to use 'customers and residents' from now on.

I hope this is helpful.

Yours sincerely



Y Cynghorydd Andrea Lewis / Councillor Andrea Lewis
Dirprwy Arweinydd / Aelod y Cabinet dros Drawsnewid Gwasanaethau
Deputy Leader / Cabinet Member for Service Transformation