



Report of the Cabinet Member for Service Transformation / Deputy Leader

Customer Contact Scrutiny Working Group – 23rd February 2024

Customer Contact and a Strategic Framework

Purpose:	To highlight performance across the Council's Customer Contact channels and outline the activities to develop a Customer Contact Strategic Framework.
Policy Framework:	Successful and Sustainable Swansea Corporate Plan - Transformation and Financial Resilience Well-being Objective Digital Strategy 2023-28
Consultation:	Finance and Legal
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FOR INFORMATION	

1. Introduction and Summary

1.1 This report highlights performance and plans across the Council's customer contact channels. The report also gives an update on customer contact transformation projects to deliver new ways of working and service improvements and plans for a new Customer Contact Strategic Framework.

1.2 Summary of the main findings of the report highlights that:

- Swansea residents and businesses have changed the way they access services since the pandemic.
- The overall trend across all the Council's call centres is one of channel shift with the volume of calls steadily decreasing in favour of other channels, particularly email including the use of online forms.

- Face-to-face visits to Civic Centre reception have significantly decreased since the pandemic.
- There has also been a fundamental shift in how people access the website since the pandemic. Visitor numbers have increased slightly and people are accessing information quicker and easier in less clicks.
- Around 90% of residents access the website via a smartphone compared with 40% before the pandemic.

2 Call Handling Performance

- 2.1 The Council operates a range of call centres, responding to queries and requests for service from residents and businesses.

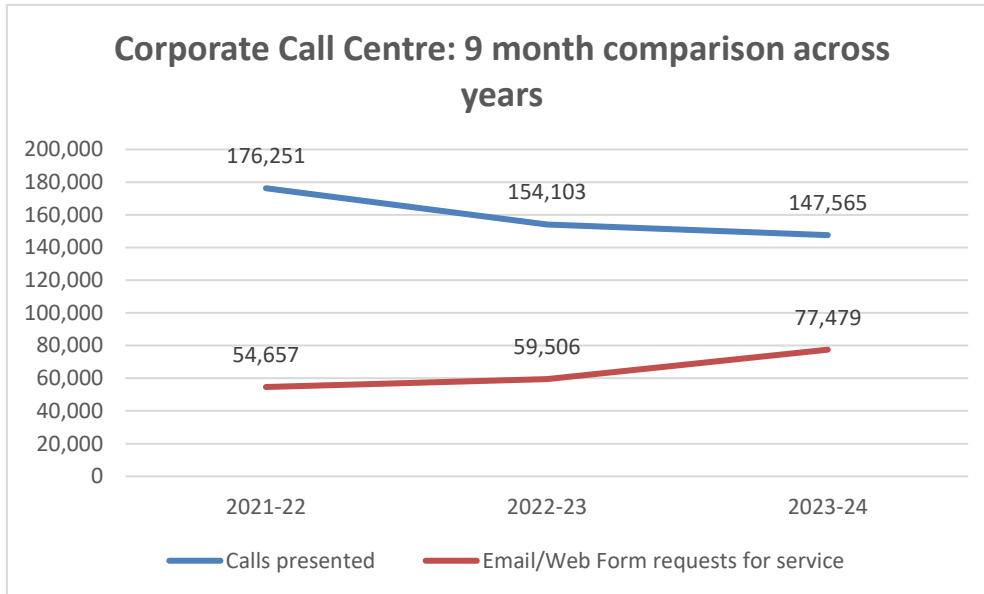
The corporate customers services call centre handles:

- Blue badge applications
- Environment queries and requests for service (Bailing plant, missed collections, bulky waste)
- Housing Repairs enquiries and requests for service (tenants and public buildings)
- Main switchboard
- Calls in Welsh are handled through the corporate call centre for: Blue badge applications, council tax, environment queries and requests for service, housing repairs, housing benefits, social care income and finance, social services, planning enquiries, and the main switchboard.

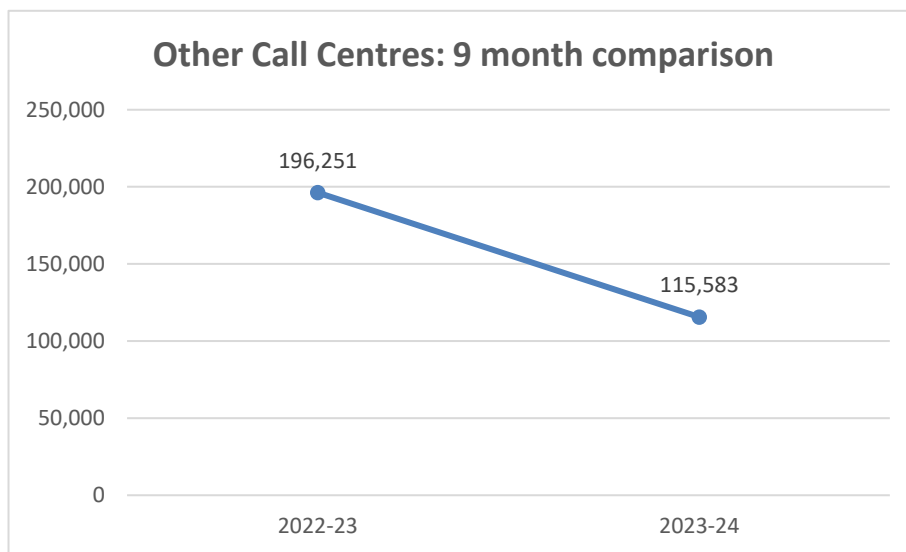
The other call centres include:

- Housing benefits
- Housing options
- Highways and highways inspectors
- Non-domestic rates
- Planning
- Social services – common access point
- School admissions
- Debt recovery
- Accounts receivable.

- 2.2 The corporate call centre is seeing a sustained reduction in calls from residents and businesses and a significant increase in requests for service via email. The diagram below illustrates calls have fallen by around 28,700 and emails (including those from forms on the website) have increased by around 22,800 since the pandemic. At this point in 2019, 45,233 emails had been received compared with 77,479 in the current year. Corporately, around 40% of emails are from contact forms on the website. These forms collect additional information, which reduces the need to phone residents back and means those service requests can then be processed.



2.3 The other call centres across the Council have also seen an overall collective reduction in calls compared with the same period last year, illustrated in the diagram below.



2.4 All the call centres are optimised around the staff and budget resources available. However, there can be an increase in call queues and abandoned call rates due to:

- High demand during peak times of the day
- Specific periodic events such as flooding or vehicle breakdown etc
- Services periodically experiencing significant staff sickness
- Services unable to fill vacancies

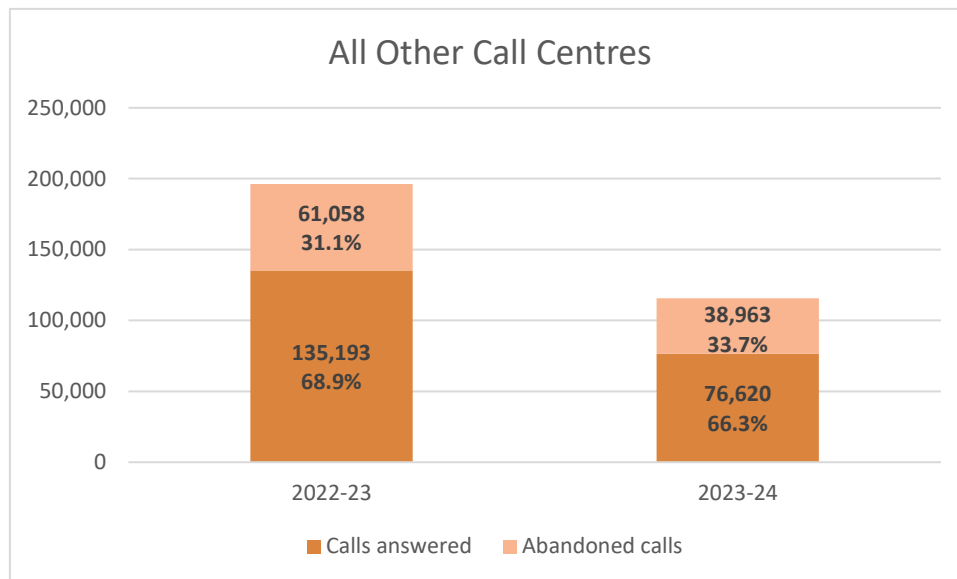
Abandoned calls in some cases can be a positive, e.g. where residents hear answers to questions on recorded messages and decide to hang up.

2.5 Abandoned calls have increased this year across all call centres. The corporate call centre has seen an increase in abandoned calls since August 2023 due to several staff leaving or retiring from the team. Recruitment has been challenging therefore temporary agency staff joined the team from November to reduce abandoned calls until the substantive posts could be filled. Action is being taken to improve performance across all the call centres including:

- A review to ensure all direct dial numbers and published phone numbers are correct and up to date.
- Increasing informative messages on the telephone system so residents do not necessarily need to wait in a queue, this in turn will increase the abandoned call rate if people find what they need and hang up.
- Expanding the data collection to understand why residents have called so this can be addressed, e.g. calling after not receiving a service elsewhere.
- Introducing voicemails facilities where appropriate so all calls are captured.

The diagrams below highlight the volume of calls answered and abandoned for the nine months to December 2023 across the past two years.



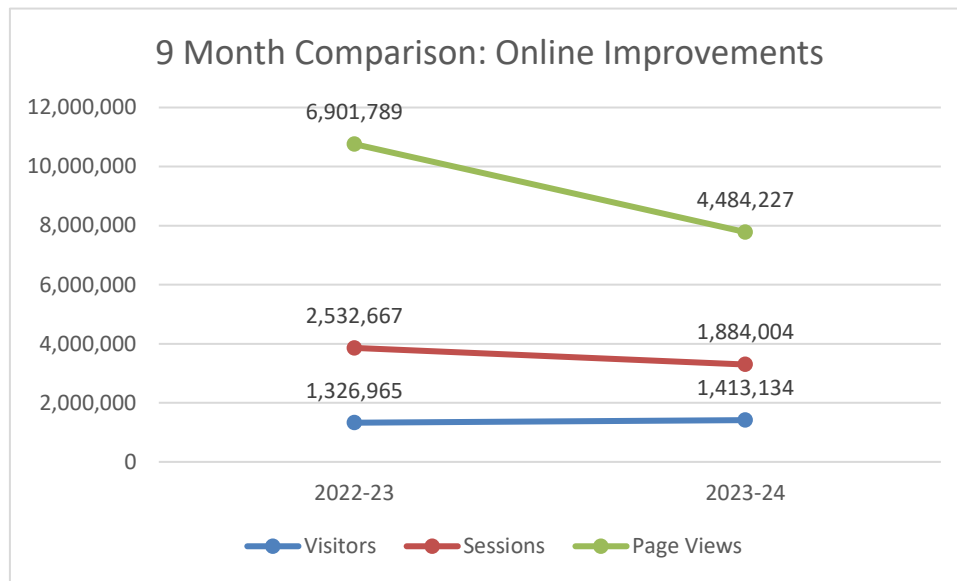


2.6 Automated Switchboard

Customer services continually evaluates performance of the automated switchboard. Each week a report shows which requests have not been recognised so the phonetics can be updated. In addition, the report shows where the back-office have not answered a call which can be investigated further by services across the Council. The automated switchboard does not prevent customers speaking to an operator (person) at any point in the call. The automated switchboard handled 13,235 calls in the month of November of which 73% of calls were successfully transferred, 23% was grammar not known by the system which will be reviewed and updated. 4% were incorrectly recognised and will be investigated further.

3 Performance of Online Channels

3.1 Significant work has been undertaken to improve the Council's online channels and the new website was launched in August 2021. Key developments involved improving accessibility, search engine optimisation and how people search and find information on the website. Previously, visitors to the website had to click around multiple pages before they found what they were looking for, whereas now the new search facility takes visitors straight to the information. Likewise, the increase in the use of mobile devices means the search optimisation work has been crucial in getting visitors from search engines straight to the information they require. The diagram below illustrates visitor numbers have increased slightly compared with the same period last year (an increase of just over 86,000), and these visitors are accessing information quicker. Page views have reduced from 6.9 million to 4.4 million as visitors find information quickly and easily in fewer clicks compared with the previous website.



3.2 Page views and sessions on the website have also decreased due to the new separate website dedicated to the Grand Theatre. Previously visitors would need to click around the site to find information relating to the theatre and other events. People are therefore accessing information differently and more easily and online revenue for the Grand Theatre has increased. Even though separate sites have been created visitor numbers have not declined.

3.3 Prior to the pandemic only 40% of people were accessing the website via a smartphone. However, since 2020 this has increased to around 90% of visitors accessing the website using a smartphone.

4 Face to Face Contact and Y Storfa

4.1 The main reception delivered by Customer Services at the Civic Centre delivers the following services:

- General advice
- Recycling requests
- Client Services on behalf of Social Services
- Parking permits
- Blue badges
- Issuing of tickets to see Council Tax and Benefits advisors.

4.2 Prior to the pandemic reception saw just over 17,000 people within the nine months to December 2019-20. In line with guidance, access to face-to-face services via reception was restricted during the pandemic and footfall has been comparatively low since restrictions were fully lifted in 2022. Reception saw around 7,500 visitors this financial year to December, which is 820 fewer people than the same period last year and 9,500 fewer than in 2019.

- 4.3 Swansea Council has plans to re-locate face-to-face services to a more convenient City Centre location on the corner of Oxford Street and Princess Way. This new hub has been named Y Storfa and will be an accessible and upgraded resource for residents and businesses needing Council services. Y Storfa will also house back-office staff and the central library.

5 Digital Inclusion

- 5.1 On 9 March 2023, Audit Wales published the report 'Digital Inclusion in Wales'. The report presented the evidence and analysis concerning the main reasons for digital inclusion. In addition to the main report, a supplemental document 'Key questions for public bodies' was published with suggested questions for public bodies to ask themselves as they consider their approach to digital inclusion.
- 5.2 These actions will be managed through the Digital Inclusion Action Plan, which will focus on addressing the main barriers to digital inclusion and improving the five digital skills for people in Swansea. This action plan will be coordinated through the Tackling Poverty Service and report regularly into the Digital Transformation Board. Governance will be subject to existing arrangements under the Transformation Delivery Board.
- 5.3 The Council has a significant number of work streams underway to support and encourage digital inclusion led by the Tackling Poverty Service. This work is overseen by the Scrutiny Digital Inclusion Working Group.
- 5.4 It is important to note that digital channels are supported by face-to-face and telephone support from Customer Services staff. One example is where Welsh Government moved all bus pass applications online. Customer Services staff help residents to complete the online forms for this and other permits along with any services requiring online forms.

6 Digital Transformation Programme

- 6.1 The Digital Strategy 2023-28 was approved by Cabinet in April 2023, along with the first tranche of Digital Transformation Programme that will deliver the strategic goals. One of the key strands is Improving Customer Access, with the aim of improving services for the public at the first point of contact whilst helping services across the Council manage rising customer demand within the budget and staff resources available.
- 6.2 The Improving Customer Access programme includes three interdependent projects including:
1. Unified Communications – upgrading the telephone platform and Customer Contact Solution to improve customer access along with associated changes to ways of working in the back office.

2. Swansea Account – A secure online account for residents to view all their interactions and service requests with the Council, track the status of service requests, and access other useful information securely. The customer account will allow residents to view requests they have submitted and find local facilities using the new ‘Find My Nearest’ mapping. As services are expanded, residents and businesses will be able to see what stage their query is at and responses already provided, starting with FOI queries and moving on to higher volume areas. Residents will also be able to make and check their bookings, e.g. at the waste and recycling centre, which will reduce calls to the corporate contact centre.
3. Automation – Automating transactional service requests and intuitively responding to enquiries. The aim is to simplify routine processes in the back office to release capacity to support more complex cases and those residents requiring telephone and/or face-to-face support.

7 Standards

- 7.1 The Corporate Services Service Transformation Committee, working alongside Council officers, has developed a new Customer Charter and Service Standards. The Charter and Standards aim to be in place from the 1st April 2024.
- 7.2 Customer Charters are considered good practice and provide a framework for communicating how the Council will meet the expectations of our residents. In addition, a Customer Charter provides clear and concise statements detailing ways by which the organisation can measure customer service levels.
- 7.3 The Service Standards demonstrate what each front facing service within the Council will adhere to, with the timescales for dealing with a query.
- 7.4 Further work is underway with professional bodies to adopt other good practice standards moving forward.

8 A Customer Contact Strategic Framework

- 8.1 As part of the Digital Strategy 2023-28, the Council plans to develop a new Customer Contact Strategic Framework. This will specifically expand the first goal in the Digital Strategy, “Excellent Customer Service aligned with our Service Standards”.
- 8.2 The activities to develop the new strategic framework involve:
 - Engaging and involving residents.
 - Understanding good practice and future models of delivery through research and support from professional bodies.
 - Engaging with Heads of Service and Councillors to understand the current challenges and opportunities.

- Formulating the strategic framework and an action plan up to 2028 in line with the Digital Strategy and Corporate Plan.
- Establishing governance and delivery mechanisms including overview and scrutiny.

9 Integrated Assessment Implications

9.1 The Council is subject to the Equality Act (Public Sector Equality Duty and the socio-economic duty), the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure, and must in the exercise of their functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Acts.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Deliver better outcomes for those people who experience socio-economic disadvantage.
- Consider opportunities for people to use the Welsh language.
- Treat the Welsh language no less favourably than English.
- Ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

9.2 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 mandates that public bodies in Wales must carry out sustainable development. Sustainable development means the process of improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales by taking action, in accordance with the sustainable development principle, aimed at achieving the 'well-being goals'.

9.3 Our Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) process ensures we have paid due regard to the above. It also takes into account other key issues and priorities, such as poverty and social exclusion, community cohesion, carers, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Welsh language.

- This report is for information only. Any activities following this report will be subject to the IIA process as required.

10 Financial Implications

10.1 There are no direct financial implications directly arising from this report. A number of service changes referenced in the report themselves have direct capital costs and revenue consequences (potential costs and savings) and these have been set out in relevant decision papers to date.

10.2 Future changes to service standards or delivery methods may have future budgetary implications and the reciprocal may also be the case, future budgetary constraints may therefore impact choices for future service delivery.

11 Legal Implications

11.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Background Papers: None

Appendices: None