

Members' questions at Council – 12 December 2014

Question from Councillor R Matthews

Customer contact

- 1 *I am constantly receiving complaints from extremely irate members of the public who are concerned that they cannot make contact with the council by telephone, as they are frequently having to wait in excess of thirty minutes for their calls to be answered. Can you please inform members as to why this should be, and what you intend to do about this appalling and unacceptable situation?*

Answer from Councillor P Morgan Cabinet Member Corporate Services

Answer to question 1

Councillor Matthews is well aware of the substantial savings that the council is having to make and our very clear priorities.

How people contact customer services is changing, so that we can use the resources we have to best effect. We are doing this because:

- the way people want to access services is changing with more demand for 24hr internet services.
- the service has seen 25% reduction in staffing since April 2013 as part of the budget reduction plan to direct resources to essential services.
- we want to reduce customer waiting and response times, and to make sure queries go to the right place to be answered

During October and November alone the customer services team handled a total of 44,673 telephone calls. Of those 13,964 had telephoned the general switchboard number; the average time calls to that number were queued being 32 seconds.

In terms of addressing both the volume of calls and the waiting times there are a range of actions already taking place:

- Transfer of customer contact for public realm queries to Balfour Beatty Living Places
- Comprehensive on-line council tax programme for customers to manage their own account and payments
- Programme of improved messaging relating to council tax to mitigate the need to call the local authority
- Current campaign for more people access services on-line who have the ability to do so
- Automated messaging for customers to use the extension number to divert their call directly to the person intended
- Increase of on-line reporting (e.g. pothole reporting direct to BBLP systems) and social media to pre-empt queries
- A concentration of resources when call volumes are at their highest (between 9-10am)

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- Additional staff being drawn in from the services to deal with surges in call numbers, for example when individual electoral registration notifications first went out to residents or black bin delivery.

The support of Councillor Matthews and all ward members in helping to promote alternative self-help contact methods would be welcomed, and will ensure that those residents with no choice but to use telephone contact will be able to access the service more easily.

Supplementary Question

Many people continued to want to contact the Council by telephone. It was unacceptable to have to wait up to 45 minutes for a call to be dealt with.

Answer by Councillor Morgan

The Cabinet Member commented that only 1 call out of over 44,000 calls received by Customer Services in October and November 2014 had been queued for 30 minutes or more. The Council had to make savings and ensure that contact with the public was managed in the most efficient way. The Council had invested in the website and the public satisfaction statistics were reasonable although there was clearly room for improvement. She accepted that using the website was not suitable for everyone and provision had to be made for those people. She invited Councillor Matthews to supply her with evidence to support his assertion that the information that had been provided to her was incorrect.