Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Overview and Scrutiny Management Board – 10 February 2021

Report Title
Outcomes from Working Group on Call Centre Communications

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?
No

Report Author(s)
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Ward(s) Affected
Borough-Wide

Report Summary
To receive findings and recommendations from the working group examining call centre communications.

Recommendations

1. That the briefing be noted and the following recommendations be submitted to Cabinet for consideration:-

   a. That the Council further promotes a digital-first route for customers to access Council services.

   b. That regular data updates be provided to the Leader and Overview and Scrutiny Management Board on a six-monthly basis.

   c. That the Customer Service Standards of the Council be reaffirmed to officers, in particular, in respect of written communication with customers.

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel
Improving Places Select Commission – 08 September 2020

Background Papers
Report: Outcomes of Scrutiny Workshop on Housing Repairs and Maintenance

Council Approval Required
No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Outcomes from Working Group on Call Centre Communications

1. Background

1.1 This Working Group was convened in keeping with the recommendation agreed at the 8 September meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission. The recommendation precipitated from a Workshop on Housing Repairs and Maintenance held on 27 August 2020. The recommendation stated that the Chari of the Improving Places Select Commission would consult with the Chari of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board and senior leadership to determine the best way to address average Housing call wait times which averaged 5 minutes, 13 seconds and abandoned calls of 37.7% for the month of August 2020.

1.2 Therefore, the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board reconvened the Communications Working Group, which had completed scrutiny of work by Communications Teams as recently as November 2019. The Working Group subsequently met on 8 October 2020 to receive a detailed presentation regarding figures associated with call centre demand. Following this meeting, a further meeting was held on 16 December to view further information which Members had requested regarding additional data breakdowns.

2. Key Issues

2.1 **Call Centre demand:** The presentation demonstrated that wait times are directly correlated to numbers of staff at the phones. It was noted that spikes in wait times in August could be attributed to school holiday periods when the maximum numbers of staff are on leave. The presentation showed a breakdown of calls by topic, which also follows seasonal trends. The presentation further showed how Covid-19 and Lockdown had affected demand. In comparison to similar authorities with a similar population and volume of calls, Rotherham MBC is about average, which is to say the call centre is not skeletal, nor does Rotherham have among the biggest, fastest and most expensive call centres.

2.2 It was noted that consideration had been given to callers being notified in real time of their "position in queue" or "estimated wait time" as they are waiting on hold, but these unfortunately often give callers discouraging and inaccurate information. It was suggested that callers be briefed in messaging as to the busiest times. The ability to add relevant information instantly on live is also leveraged, especially when there are high volumes of calls requesting information related to a certain topic that may be breaking, but it is important not to encumber the process with too many unnecessary steps or options that can complicate matters for callers.

2.3 **Reducing wait times and abandoned calls:** It was emphasised that call wait times could decrease only with the addition of staff or with a decrease in demand. Service users may not know that they get the same response times

with online queries as they do if they ring the Council. In fact, if residents ring the council when they could also go online, the extra call volume means that people, often vulnerable individuals, who cannot go online have to wait longer. It was understood that for residents who are unable to go online, accessing services via phone remains the best avenue. The more residents choose to access services online, the shorter wait times will be for those who can only phone in.

2.4 **Quality Standards:** Information was also provided about how the Council handles emergency requests, observing that it can be impossible to know if an issue is really an emergency without first speaking to the caller A discrepancy can sometimes be encountered between what the resident considers an emergency and what the service considers an emergency. Four-hour response times are the goal. Occasionally, it happens that calls do not result in outcomes; for example, a repair or service may be scheduled but not completed. It also happens that a caller may not know to whom they need to speak, in which case it takes time to ascertain what kind of request is being presented.

2.5 Information about training and skills development of the phone teams were also described, and it was noted that many individuals on the phone teams advance to take on other roles within the Council. Therefore, training is ongoing, even during lockdown, and considerable efforts go toward ensuring teams are briefed with the most current and thorough information. Due to complexity of Housing-related calls, it is necessary for call centre staff to be highly trained in order to answer calls related to Housing. Quality standards were described and affirmed in the presentation as well, as complaints are almost always related to situations experienced by customers rather than about the handling of their calls.

3.   Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

3.1 The timetable and accountability for implementing recommendations arising from this report will sit with the Cabinet and officers. The Overview and Scrutiny Procedurals require the Cabinet to consider and respond to recommendations made by scrutiny within two months.

4.   Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

4.1 There are no Financial or procurement implications associated with this report.

5.   Legal Advice and Implications

5.1 There are no Legal implications associated with this report.

6.   Human Resources Advice and Implications

6.1 There are no Human Resources Implications Associated with this report.

7. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

7.1 These have been set out in the relevant portions of the report.

8. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

8.1 Members have had regard to equalities implications when considering recommendations and other matters arising from the working group.

9. Implications for Partners

9.1 There are no implications for partners arising from this report.

10. Risks and Mitigation

10.1 Members have been advised previously of risk assessments and mitigation plans, and these have been taken into account in their consideration of potential recommendations.

11. Accountable Officer
Craig Tyler, Head of Democratic Services and Statutory Scrutiny Officer

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