

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

| | | |
|----|---------------------|--|
| 1. | Meeting: | Cabinet Member for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods |
| 2. | Date: | 15th October 2012 |
| 3. | Title: | Housing Customer Contact Centre Update |
| 4. | Directorate: | Neighbourhoods and Adult Services |

5. Summary

The Housing Customer Contact Centre has recently experienced a number of operational difficulties which have negatively impacted upon the delivery of customer services to agreed service standards and performance.

This report identifies the key issues which have impacted upon the service and the remedial actions that have been implemented.

6. Recommendations

That the Cabinet Member notes the content of the report and the actions that have been implemented to restore levels of service delivery and performance.

7. Proposals and Details

7.1 Background

Housing enquires are currently channelled through three routes. Repairs issues are dealt with by Connect, (the former RBT service), repairs calls after 8pm are dealt with by Rothercare and the Housing Customer Contact Centre, based within Riverside House, handles customer enquiries on a range of other(non-repairs) housing issues. In addition to call handling the Customer Service Assistant's (CSA's) in the Contact Centre also provide administrative support for defined areas of the service, including Rent Recovery, Key Choices and Housing Management . In order to do this effectively, staff are trained extensively on all aspects of the services they support.

7.2 Service delivery issues

During recent months the Housing Customer Contact Centre has faced numerous key challenges that have negatively impacted upon the delivery of services to customers and the standards of service and performance that we are committed to.

The key issues impacting upon the service have been as follows:-

- High levels of staff turnover amongst the Customer Services Assistants (CSA's) with highly skilled staff securing employment elsewhere in the organisation as a result of vacancies arising from the re-organisation of the housing service post re-integration with 2010 Ltd. To date 11 CSA's from a staff compliment of 24 have left the team to take up alternative employment opportunities within other areas of the service/Council, and as a result there are currently 6 vacancies. Whilst this has seen positive progression for experienced and skilled staff and the retention of key skills and knowledge within the service/Council, it has resulted in a steady loss of experienced capacity within the contact centre.
- Recruitment processes to replace capacity within the service have tried to keep pace with staff turnover, but this has proved difficult to achieve. Predominantly recruitment has been geared towards internal recruitment, in support of wider Council change processes, which has not always delivered the quantity or acceptable calibre of candidate to undertake this challenging role. In addition, as with any recruitment into posts, there is a period of training and development required to optimise performance from new staff members.
- Changes in customer access arrangements, particularly the alignment of other service area contact arrangements, such as Key Choices, into the housing contact centre has created increased call volumes by around 25 - 40%.

In general, a constantly changing staff position, coupled with increasing call volumes has resulted in a significant decline in performance.

7.2 Mitigation

The following measures were implemented in order to address service pressures and restore standards of service and service delivery.

- Analysing call volumes/peak times and deploying CSA's tactically to cover peak call handling times, whilst maintaining an acceptable level of capacity focussing on other work streams, such as general administration.
- Analysing CSA skill sets and individual performance and deploying staff to ensuring the most proficient call handlers are being deployed to call handling.
- Maximising call handler availability by managing associated administrative tasks more effectively. In effect, diverting more complex administrative functions arising from customer contact, to back office staff, freeing up the call handler.
- Managing vacancy levels effectively to ensure all vacancies were filled soon after they became available.
- Changing the telephone messaging service script to offer customers a wider range of options to access services, including the website.
- Ensuring that CSA's working in the Customer Service Centres have clear priorities and ongoing guidance from supervisors/management in respect of call handling.
- Reviewing call handling processes to ensure customers are, as far as possible, dealt with effectively at the first point of contact, whilst recognising that some enquiries may have to be redirected and if so, in a timely manner.
- Managing day to day issues such as leave and secondment requests in a way which is both conducive to maintaining good working relationships, but also reflecting the demands of the service.

Whilst these measures initially began reversing the situation and performance began to improve, staffing pressures again began to negatively impact on performance. During September, it was becoming clear that operational solutions from within the contact centre team alone were no longer sufficient to deal with the situation. As such, resources from other parts of the service would have to be redeployed into customer contact. This resulted in the following further measures being put in place.

- Withdrawing CSA's from the Councils Customer Service Centres to provide additional capacity to support more effective call handling. This was supported by the provision of customer freephone access within CSC's direct to the contact centre, support from corporate customer services staff and housing operational staff based within the centres.
- Drawing on staffing support from other areas of the service to support call handling and administration.

- Exploring all possible routes to recruit staff capacity as rapidly as possible.
- Drawing on potential additional capacity through offering overtime and additional hours opportunities to staff within the service.
- Re-organising call management to direct calls specifically for Key Choices to be managed within that service.
- Drawing on Housing Champions on a rota basis, to provide cover for the Customer Contact Centre service to help maintain service delivery.
- Continuing to review operational processes and working practices, to ensure they are as efficient as possible to maximise service outputs.
- Continuing to tightly managing operational issues such as sickness absence and annual leave requests, based upon the needs of the service.
- Week on week rota system identifying staff availability and potential pressure points, ensuring that additional capacity can be assembled in a timely and effective manner.

7.3 Impact

Following implementation of these actions, performance has improved significantly with reductions in abandoned call ratios and call waiting times.

The table below provides a snapshot of performance prior to (late September) and since implementation of the measures above.

| Date | Incoming Calls | Calls Answered | Calls Abandoned (by caller) % | Average Delay before answering (Mins) |
|------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 28/09/2012 | 563 | 342 | 39.25 | 8.25 |
| 01/10/2012 | 738 | 561 | 23.98 | 3.44 |
| 02/10/2012 | 480 | 438 | 8.54 | 1.25 |
| 03/10/2012 | 616 | 571 | 7.75 | 1.16 |
| 04/10/2012 | 484 | 458 | 5.37 | 1.20 |
| 05/10/2012 | 460 | 409 | 11.09 | 1.37 |
| 08/10/2012 | 794 | 770 | 3.02 | .04 |
| 09/10/2012 | 483 | 475 | 1.24 | .15 |

7.4 The role of Housing Champions

Perhaps the most decisive measure that has been introduced to improve performance has been the decision to call upon the Housing Champions to support the Customer Contact Centre. Whilst this creates an added pressure elsewhere, the rota arrangements have sought to minimise the impact on individuals and other work streams. The current arrangements are not

envisaged to be long term but to maintain staffing capacity within the contact centre until such time that it can sustain operations with its own staff resources.

In addition to providing call handling services the CSA's primary role is to provide administrative support services to specialist front line officers including the Housing Champions. By moving the Housing Champions into the Customer Contact Centre a number of other opportunities and benefits have also presented themselves including:

- Improved access to services for customers – customers are now able to access advice from a Housing Champion at the first point of contact rather than have to schedule appointments. This process is contributing to increased call resolution at the first point of contact.
- Improving the overall awareness and understanding of roles and responsibilities between Housing Champions and Customer Service Assistants. This experience will be utilised to deliver more effective support processes.
- Generating a much clearer understanding about the processes that are in place and the role each respective officer plays in making sure the service functions efficiently and the customers experience is positive.
- Providing opportunities for CSA's, particularly the more inexperienced staff to gain on the job experience from their more experienced counterparts. This is particularly important for a service where the training opportunities have become limited due to operational pressures. Added capacity enables an opportunity to exploit every opportunity to improve staff skills and capability.
- Providing opportunities to create efficiencies in the service by identifying and removing any possible duplication between the respective roles of the CSA's and the Housing Champions.

The current arrangements are working extremely well from a call handling perspective, performance levels are improving and the contact centre team is responding well to the added support being provided. Recruitment to the outstanding vacancies has commenced and it is anticipated that appointments to outstanding vacancies will be made during the next few weeks. The situation is being monitored on a daily basis with regular reporting to senior management.

8. Finance

There are no immediate financial implications. Operational arrangements are being managed within agreed service budgets.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

Recruitment processes are ongoing. However, the success of recruitment will be dictated by how the job market responds to the vacancies. We are confident

that in the current climate, the posts will attract solid interest, particularly from applicants external to the Council.

Utilising Housing Champions may impact on other key work streams such as ASB management and tenancy and estate management. Adopting a rota approach working around Housing Champions existing commitments will help mitigate this as far as possible.

Without these interim arrangements the main risk to the business would be that customers wanting to access the services via the Customer Contact Centre would simply not have their calls dealt with within the prescribed timescales. It is felt that the arrangements that have been put in place will deliver the required outcomes for all of the Councils customers with the minimum disruption.

Providing poor customer services at first point of contact will negatively impact upon customer perceptions of the service and the Council as a whole.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

Supporting our customers and particularly the most vulnerable, through the provision of high quality responsive services at first point of contact.

11. Background Papers and Consultation

Daily performance statistics relating to the Customer Contact Centre are held by the Customer Contact Centre Manager.

Contact Names: Julian A Hurley, Customer Contact Centre Manager,
julian.hurley@rotherham.gov.uk