

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

AGENDA ITEM 8a

28 APRIL 2015

<p>REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH GROUP - CUSTOMER CONTACT</p>

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To present the interim findings of the Scrutiny Task and Finish Group following its examination of customer contact between the public and Middlesbrough Council.

BACKGROUND

2. Over the past five years, significant public sector spending cuts have impacted significantly on local authorities, including Middlesbrough Council. This has affected not only what services are provided but also how they are delivered.
3. Against this background, the expectations of the public/customers have changed over the last decade or so as more and more services are made available online or accessed/requested through means such as electronic communications. Customers increasingly expect a high-standard, personal service that delivers the right outcome.
4. In this context, the task and finish group sought to examine how the public contacts Middlesbrough Council in respect of environmental service requests. Environmental issues are generally recognised as being of great importance to the public, with a high volume of service requests being received. It was considered that this approach would provide the task and finish group with a narrower focus for its investigation.

MEMBERSHIP AND FINDINGS

5. The task and finish group comprised Councillors L Junier, J Walker and N Walker. The group investigated this topic over three informal meetings held between 7 January and 25 February 2015. The meetings also included visits to Middlesbrough Council's and Stockton Council's Customer Contact Centres.
6. The task and finish group's findings are set out below under the following sub-headings:
 - Middlesbrough Council Contact Centre
 - Referrals to Cargo Fleet Depot
 - Visit to Stockton Customer Centre
 - Conclusions and recommendations

Middlesbrough Council Contact Centre

7. A visit was arranged to the Middlesbrough Council Contact Centre. Task and finish group Members spoke to staff at the centre and officers who are responsible for its management. The Contact Centre is managed and staffed by Mouchel. Members also saw how telephone calls are dealt with and customer service requests dealt with/processed.
8. It was explained that the bulk of visitors to the centre relate to benefits enquiries, with an automated/self-serve system now in place. A large number of visitors also attend in respect of Council Tax issues. However, counter staff are also able to deal with environmental issues and there are plans to expand the self-serve system to cover environmental functions such as junk jobs.
9. Under the heading of 'Environment', the 'Contact Us' section of Middlesbrough Council's website shows a telephone number to deal with the following environmental issues: *Refuse collection, wheelie bins, street cleaning, road and pavement repairs, graffiti removal, street lighting, litter, fly tipping, abandoned vehicles, noisy neighbours, housing, stray dogs and trees*. Call centre staff receive training and have prepared scripts that cover environmental issues and services.
10. Customers telephoning the Contact Centre regarding environmental issues hear a recorded message. This highlights the availability of the *My Middlesbrough* online portal. This is a new, online Middlesbrough Council service which allows customers to do a range of activities via the authority's website, without the need to pick up a telephone, make contact in writing, or visit a Council building. This service is to be expanded in future but currently covers 80 Council-wide subject areas, including environmental issues such as refuse collection/bins, allotments, stray dogs, fly tipping and litter.
11. The process for dealing with environment-related issues that are raised by telephone but that cannot be dealt with by the Contact Centre was explained. These cases are all recorded by the Contact Centre and then referred to Cargo Fleet Depot, where they are dealt with directly by Environmental Services staff.
12. Members considered information from 2013 and 2014 in respect of the number of environment-related service requests received by the Council's Customer Contact Centre in relation to overall service requests/enquiries, as follows:

Year	Incoming Calls - Total No.	Incoming Calls - Environment
2013	109,369	84,143 (77%)
2014	95,498	70,385 (74%)

Referrals to Cargo Fleet Depot

13. Members met with Streetscene and Mouchel staff about the process of dealing with environmental telephone enquiries that are referred to Cargo Fleet Depot. It was explained that the type of referrals varies and that volumes of calls can occur in peaks and troughs. For example, a peak period was when charges were introduced for

replacement wheelie bins. Also, a number of referrals relate to cases where a customer will not accept what they are told by Contact Centre staff.

14. To illustrate examples of referrals, Members received statistical information for a sample month (January 2015). This showed that of 26,722 calls received, 2,861 (10.7%) were forwarded or queried and dealt with by officers at Cargo Fleet Depot.

15. The reasons why these calls were referred are shown below. Most of these related to issues identified by the service area as urgent, or where answers were not available on the electronic Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. Such cases cannot be dealt with by CRM without ringing through. These are marked with an asterisk*.

- Highway Emergencies*
- Broken Glass*
- Dates for one off collections*
- Delays in refuse collections*
- Chasing up a previous report that has a lot of updates*
- Junk Jobs not collected
- Allotment queries*
- Checking bin collection days (new builds) *
- Fallen/dangerous trees*
- Asking for Junk Job/Bin delivery dates to be put onto CRM
- Needles*
- Dead Animals*
- Customer asks to speak to a service area manager and relevant manager(s) not available*
- Offensive graffiti*

16. Based on the information above, and assuming that around 11% of environmental services-related calls received by the Contact Centre are referred to Cargo Fleet Depot, this would equate to over 7,500 referrals in 2014.

17. In response to Members' questions and points raised during the discussion, it was suggested that it could be opportune to review/revise the scripts that are used by Contact Centre staff in respect of environmental services/issues. Reference was also made to the possibility of locating some Contact Centre staff at Cargo Fleet. It was suggested that this could improve the service to customers as such staff would gain a more in-depth knowledge of the Council's environmental services.

18. Other issues that were raised were as follows:

- a) Problems reporting environmental issues online where this relates to identifying a location or area of land (eg fly tipping). Members highlighted that the existing online system is difficult to navigate/use as written descriptions are used, as opposed to maps.
- b) Issues relating to determining which areas of land in Middlesbrough are owned by Erimus Housing. Members queried whether the contact centre could be provided with a mapping system that shows this information so that referrals could then be made directly to Erimus. At the present time, referrals are made to Cargo Fleet

Depot, with Council officers then checking land ownership before forwarding relevant service requests to Erimus.

- c) Whether Council staff in customer contact points such as libraries or community hubs could receive basic training in use of the relevant information systems.
- d) Whether a system could be introduced to refer jobs (eg junk jobs) directly to Council operatives. At the moment, all service requests received via calls to the Contact Centre or via the Council website are recorded electronically (with a separate customer record created for each) and then forwarded, as appropriate, to Streetscene. In the case of junk jobs, these are then printed off daily and passed to service operatives. Middlesbrough Council does not currently issue any type of hand held electronic devices to operatives.
- e) Whether an automatic e mail could be generated to advise customers that service requests have been actioned/resolved.
- f) Whether an electronic record is necessary for all enquiries/service requests. Are these needed where an issue is dealt with at the first point of contact?
- g) Whether the one-stop system of reports/service requests from elected Members could be streamlined. It was explained that, in some cases, this can involve 22 stages from start to finish.

Visit to Stockton Customer Service Centre

- 19. Members visited Stockton Borough Council to view its Customer Service Centre arrangements and to speak to relevant officers. It was explained that changes to the ways in which customers contact the Council resulted from Stockton's Access to Services Strategy, published in 2007. Surveys at that time showed that the preferred method of communication for around 80% of customers was by telephone.
- 20. The Customer Service Centre had opened in early 2008 and initially dealt with environmental services (Care for Your Area), benefits and taxation. The centre, which is located in Stockton Library, adjacent to the Municipal Buildings, now deals with fifteen Council services, plus ad-hoc issues where appropriate. For example, advice is currently being provided on The Care Act.
- 21. In addition to the main Stockton Service Centre, face to face customer contact is also provided at centres in Billingham and Thornaby.
- 22. Systems are integrated with back office functions so that, as far as possible, customer enquiries are resolved at the first point of contact. The authority is moving towards electronic contact as its preferred means of customer contact and has launched an electronic portal ('My Stockton') to encourage this shift. My Stockton allows easy access to up to 20 online services and provides updates on service requests.
- 23. It was noted that Stockton's electronic system also covers junk job bookings, whereas Middlesbrough still operates a manual system. Stockton officers indicated that they may be able to assist/advise on this and also on their plans to introduce an electronic permit system for vans visiting the Haverton Hill Civic Amenity Site.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

24. It was noted that the Council has appointed a Change Programme Customer Lead to produce a Customer Strategy for the authority. This work will help to inform future decisions in respect of customer contact provision.

25. Also, some services that are currently provided by Mouchel are to be transferred to the Council in June 2015. This will include the Council's Customer Contact Centre, reception and cash desk facilities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

26. Possible conclusions and recommendations arising from the task and finish group's investigation will be discussed at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

27. The task and finish group would like to thank the following people for their assistance with its work:

- Michele Charge - Customer Services Manager, Mouchel.
- Wendy Langley - Service Performance Officer, Neighbourhoods and Communities.
- Julie Parry - Performance Officer, Neighbourhoods and Communities.
- Clare Steven - Customer Services Manager, Mouchel.
- John Polson - Partnership Manager, Commercial and Corporate Services.
- Alison Williams - Head of Management Services & Performance, Mouchel.

Plus the following officers of Stockton Borough Council:

- Cath Hornsey
- Debbie Hurwood
- Lisa Johnson
- Dave Scougall

BACKGROUND PAPERS

28. The following sources were consulted or referred to in preparing this report:

- <http://www.lgcplus.com/news/finance/efficiency/the-importance-of-customer-service/5028114.article>
- My Middlesbrough website - <https://my.middlesbrough.gov.uk/#/module/home>
- Stockton Council website - www.Stockton.gov.uk

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