

**EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE**

A meeting of the Executive Member for Finance and Governance was held on Tuesday 11 October 2022.

**PRESENT:** Councillors , S Walker

**PRESENT BY INVITATION:** Councillors

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:**

**OFFICERS:** S Blakey, C Breheny and J Savage

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:** Councillors

22/3

**RESIDENT AND BUSINESS SUPPORT TELEPHONY SOLUTION**

The Director of Finance submitted a report to seek approval for amendments to the inbound telephony opening hours for Resident and Business Support.

The report advised that the inbound telephone solution was a resource-intensive priority to the Resident and Business Support service with staff being rotated daily to respond to phone demand. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, closure of the customer contact centre and restrictions on staff working from the office in 2020 and 2021, the inbound telephony solution provided a vital contact mechanism enabling residents and businesses without the digital access or skills to use our online self-serve portals to receive financial advice and support. On 8 June 2021 the Executive Member for Finance and Governance approved proposed changes to the telephony opening hours for Revenues and Benefits, from 8.30am until 5.00pm (Friday 4.30pm) to the current opening hours of 10.00am until 4.00pm Monday to Friday which became effective from Monday 5 July 2021. As a result of these highly successful changes, the service was able to better respond to demand with extra resources being allocated during peak call times, as well as maximising cash collection ability outside of opening hours including the clearance of outstanding work and undertaking targeted outbound collection activity. Middlesbrough's existing high levels of multiple deprivation factors have been exacerbated first by the impact of Covid-19 and more recently by the energy and cost of living crises, resulting in growing numbers of residents and businesses with complex, diverse and manifold financial support needs.

In order to address these needs, on 12 July 2022 Executive approved the council's Welfare Strategy to combine a wide collective of support policies and implement a holistic single-touch approach to support Middlesbrough's most vulnerable residents, incorporating debt management solutions, crisis support, Council Tax Reduction, benefits maximisation and hardship relief, facilitated by the Resident and Business Support Service. However the daily resourcing of inbound council tax and benefits phone lines restricts the effectiveness of this solution due to daily pressure to respond to high call queues, and limiting the ability of Advisors to offer end-to-end wraparound account support to those in highest need.

To advance and strengthen this innovative Welfare Strategy approach, it was essential that general inbound phone open times and demand are carefully, effectively and responsively managed. Increasing phone line downtime will ensure vital time and resources are protected for specified periods each week, in order to best utilise the skills and experience of Officers in targeted financial support campaigns directed at our most vulnerable and hardest to reach residents.

Proposed telephony solution

The initial proposal is to close the inbound phonelines for one day a week from **Thursday 3 November 2022**, to maximise outbound targeted financial support and income recovery. In

order to mitigate impact on accessibility of the service for residents and businesses, the opening times on the remaining days will be increased to 4.30pm from the current 4pm closure time with the exception of a Friday which will remain at 4.00pm.

Following a 2-month trial period and careful consideration of resulting performance levels, a further weekly closure day may be implemented. Should this not be practical, consideration will be given to reducing the daily open times, which will provide an ideal opportunity to target specific areas of the town where support is needed, thus avoiding the need for these residents to contact the service at a later date. The telephony solution will be transformed in such a way that the service can reduce the level of random calls coming into the service by introducing more specific ways of engagement with residents who are experiencing financial insecurities.

The report further provided information on the solution.

#### OPTIONS

##### **Other potential decision(s) and why these have not been recommended**

None proposed.

#### ORDERED

1. That the Executive Member for Finance and Governance approve the approach towards a more targeted and needs-responsive Resident and Business Support telephony solution.
2. The proposed decision is that the Executive Member for Finance and Governance:
  - Approves the proposed telephony solution.
  - Approves that delegated authority be provided to the Head of Resident and Business Support to approve any future similar modifications to the telephony solution, in response to changing need, demand and resources.

#### REASONS

The decisions were supported by the following reasons:

1. Although the opening hours are reducing, the proposed change would support an improvement in service delivery/customer experience as it will allow additional staff to be placed on phone lines at peak times reducing wait times, whilst also providing for increased and improved account processing which will reduce the overall telephone contact demand into the service.
2. The protected downtime to inbound calls would also facilitate time and resources for targeted financial support campaigns directed at our most vulnerable and hardest to reach residents, in line with the new Welfare Strategy.
3. Collection and debt recovery activity would be significantly increased, including enhanced utilisation of the Voicescape solution, to maximise income generation and mitigate risks to the Medium Term Financial Plan.

**The decision will come into force after five working days following the day the decision were published unless the decision becomes subject to the call in procedures.**

