

Report of:	Director of Finance
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Submitted to:	Executive Member for Finance and Governance
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Date:	11 October 2022
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Title:	Resident and Business Support Telephony Solution
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Report for:	Decision
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Status:	Public
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Strategic priority:	Vulnerability
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Key decision:	Yes
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Why:	Decision(s) will have a significant impact in two or more wards
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Urgent:	No
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Why:	N/A
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Executive summary

The Executive Member for Finance & Governance is asked to approve the following recommendations:-

- Amendment to the inbound telephony opening hours for Resident and Business Support.
- That delegated authority be provided to the Head of Resident and Business Support, to approve any future similar modifications to opening hours in response to changing resources and demand.

Purpose

1. This report seeks approval for amendments to the inbound telephony opening hours for Resident and Business Support.

Background and relevant information

2. The inbound telephone solution is 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.
3. During periods of high activity, especially during council administration of temporary government initiatives such as covid and cost of living grants, inbound call demand exceeded resource due to residents and businesses seeking information and reassurance that could be found elsewhere such as the council website. The long call queues at peak times resulting from the volume of these low-value calls resulted in frustration for residents and businesses attempting to contact the service to make a rates payment or respond to bills, reminders or summons letters. Potentially vulnerable and financially-stretched households struggle to reach our skilled and experienced advisors for help with reviewing and settling their accounts among the high phone traffic.
4. Since 2020, Middlesbrough Council, like many local authorities, has been faced with a mounting challenge of council tax collection. As the Covid-19's economic impact escalated, the numbers of residents falling into arrears, many for the first time, significantly increased. At the same time, the pandemic forced the temporary closure of the court system, resulting in a significant disruption to the council's debt recovery action towards solvent non-payers. This has caused a substantial risk to the council's ability to meet the Medium Term Financial Plan and resource vital services across the organisation.
5. The huge burden on the revenues and benefits teams of administering government grants and financial support to residents and businesses, including the Council Tax Energy Rebate and Household Support Fund, has diverted a substantial level of resource within the service away from critical council tax, business rates and benefits accounts processing work, resulting in significant service pressures and backlogs.
6. 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.
7. 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.

8. 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.
9. To advance and strengthen this innovative Welfare Strategy approach, it is 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.
10. In November 2020, the Resident and Business Support Service introduced Voicescape, an innovative software solution replacing manual, resource-intensive outbound calls with a transformational automatic engagement tool that maximises tailored engagement with targeted cohorts of residents and businesses at risk of or experiencing arrears and generates significantly improved income recovery. Unfortunately, utilisation of this highly-powerful tool has had to be subdued during 2022 due to the service pressures outlined above. Partial reduction in phonenumber opening hours would enable the service to capitalise on the use and resultant benefits of this system.

Proposed Telephony Solution

11. The initial proposal is to close the inbound phonenumber 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.
12. 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.
13. The reduction in inbound availability will be mitigated as the service will be making outbound calls to those who would ordinarily call the service once they fall into the recovery cycle. The service is also considering the potential introduction of a late-night opening of the phonenumber to improve accessibility for those residents who are working during core business hours. It has to be said that other Local Authorities have piloted

this idea and have since abandoned it due to the lack of resident engagement. Prior to progressing with extended hours a full and comprehensive review will be undertaken to determine whether this would add value to what is already available to residents and businesses.

14. A tested and comprehensive communications plan will be rolled out via all available council media channels to ensure residents and businesses are notified of the planned changes. All service documentation, webpages, telephone messages and other channels will be updated to reflect the changes in advance of the 'go live' date.
15. In addition to the telephony solution, customers will continue to be signposted to our online channels where they can access the latest information and advice, make enquiries, report changes and upload evidence for their accounts/claims. This route into the service is extremely popular and easily accessible. A full-scale review of the council's council tax and benefits webpages is currently underway to update and improve information available for residents and reduce the need to contact the service via phone.
16. The Customer Contact Centre in Middlesbrough House has now also reopened for in-person appointments, with dedicated hubs for revenues and benefits advice resourced daily on a rota basis to provide advice and support for vulnerable residents and complex cases.

What decision(s) are being recommended?

17. That the Executive Member for Finance and Governance approve the approach towards a more targeted and needs-responsive Resident and Business Support telephony solution.
18. 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.*

Rationale for the recommended decision(s)

19. Although the opening hours are reducing, the proposed change will 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.
20. The protected downtime to inbound calls will 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.
21. Collection and debt recovery activity will be significantly increased, including enhanced utilisation of the Voicescape solution, to maximise income generation and mitigate risks to the Medium Term Financial Plan.

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

22. N/A.

Impact(s) of the recommended decision(s)

Legal

23. There are no legal implications regarding this report.

Strategic priorities and risks

24. The proposed scheme will contribute as follows to the Council's strategic plan.

People	Place	Business
<i>Better utilisation of service resources will ensure residents who require financial advice and help are supported.</i>	<i>NA</i>	<i>Better utilisation of service resources will ensure businesses that require financial advice and help are supported.</i>

25. Any low level risk will be mitigated through appropriate communications and relevant lead in time. Notwithstanding the telephony solution will still be available on the remaining weekdays. This proposal will however have a mitigating impact on the following risk:

- **08-075** Reduction in Council Tax Collection - As extra resource is allocated to support the administration of council tax accounts and income recovery activity this proposal will help to mitigate this risk.

Human Rights, Equality and Data Protection

26. The proposed solution has been designed to facilitate the council's newly adopted Welfare Strategy to support the town's most vulnerable groups.

Financial

27. There are no legal implications regarding this report.

Actions to be taken to implement the recommended decision(s)

Action	Responsible Officer	Deadline
Initiate Communications Plan	Janette Savage	Immediately following approval.
Implement new telephony opening hours	Janette Savage	3 November 2022.

Appendices

28. Appendix 1 – Impact Assessment

Background papers

Body	Report title	Date
Middlesbrough Council	Change to telephony opening hours for Revenues and Benefits	8 June 2021
Middlesbrough Council	Welfare Strategy	12 July 2022

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