

Customer Services: Experience of Residents in Contacting the Council

20th October 2025

Introduction

- Customer Services comprises
 - a digital contact centre (phones and online contact)
 - two face to face centres (within Wood Green and Marcus Garvey libraries)
- CS handle frontline contact on behalf of a number of council services, but not Adults or Children's Social Services.
- Invited to attend Overview and Scrutiny Committee to discuss concerns about Customer Services' telephone performance.
- We were asked to describe the current position with performance, staffing levels, and options for improving.

Current position

- Performance is currently at an all-time low
 - 58% of calls answered in September vs 90% target
 - 61% of visitors seen in 20 mins in September vs 70% target
- This has occurred due to:
 - Staffing levels
 - Budget reductions
- We are currently missing 9 FTE from service due to vacancies and sickness, & shortly, no Head of Service (recruitment subject to approval)

Contact Centre trends: reducing call volumes but increased workload due to increasing complexity, and reduced staffing creating an increasing capacity gap and performance deterioration

	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26 50% actual, 50% forecast
Total calls presented	330,662	339,759	315,508
Total calls answered	275,934	249,186	214,826
Avg handling time	08:06	09:34	10:13
Total handling time if we handled everything (mins)	111,598	135,432	120,329
Avg no. of staff we need to hit SLA (FTE) based on Erlang calculator	40.3*	49*	48.7
Avg no. of staff employed to take calls (FTE)	28.4	27.7	22.5
Avg no. of staff deployed to calls (FTE) after shrinkage	19.9	19.4	13.5
Avg calls handled per FTE per day	55	51	63
% calls answered	83%*	73%*	68%
% calls answered (excluding positively abandoned calls from total calls presented)	93%*	91%*	n/a

*Call capping in place, preventing 20%+ calls entering the queue

Staffing levels

- The service has had a structural deficit (capacity to manage demand) for many years
- The service has been attempting to maintain performance by utilising existing staff for overtime, but this is not healthy or sustainable.
- Even with this overtime, performance has systematically been poor, with under 80% of calls answered against a target of 90%.
- Every week many customers wait *over an hour* for their calls to be answered and this in turn triggers complaints and members enquiries; increasing further the workload for the service to manage.
- Some of the gap in the targets is being compensated for with customer callbacks.
- Performance has dropped even further to 58% of calls answered and an 85.4% increase in wait times for reasons explained below.
- Customer Services staff work exceptionally hard, and the poor service performance does not reflect a lack of productivity.
- Customer Services staff currently handle 63 calls per day per FTE on average

Staffing continued..

- The structural deficit is evidenced by the industry standard Erlang calculator for call centre capacity
- This shows that to answer 90% of calls within 30 minutes - already a very low standard - we should have **48.7 FTE** employed, so that **36.5 FTE** are available after 'shrinkage' (annual leave, break time, 1-1s, training, and sickness).
- Our budget for FTE call handling staff is for **22.5 FTE**, so is **54% less** than the industry calculator says we need. After shrinkage, we have **13.5 FTE available** on the phones on average.
- This does not include the staffing we use to carry out processing work, e.g. logging Housing repairs from webforms submitted to us.

Staff sickness

- Staff sickness absence significantly contributes to the demand pressure
 - 1,466 FTE days were lost in CS in the past 12 months
- Mental health related issues are the most frequent cause of sickness absence
 - 381.1 FTE days were lost to mental health related sickness in the past 12 months

Budget reductions, that were based on residents shifting to digital self-service

	2019	2020	2024	2025
Budget reductions	£500k	£570k	£160k	£160k
Staffing reductions	13 FTE	13.5 FTE	3.3 FTE	3.2 FTE
Delivery of savings	FOBO	FOBO	Digital + localities model	Digital + localities model

- Salaries are the only major budget spend for Customer Services so these savings can only be delivered by reducing staff through restructures or natural attrition
- Reducing staff without a workload reduction means excessive work for staff and then higher sickness – this is what has happened
- This year's savings are not on track to be met, and the service is currently forecasting an overspend of £70k, which is 1.4 FTE

Future budget reductions

- All departments in the Council have been tasked with reducing their budgets by a further 5% in 2025/26.
 - In Customer Services this is £146,618
 - This will further reduce staffing by 2.9 FTE
- As well as this there are also Digital (legacy) savings, being calculated by Digital Services, that will be deducted from the Customer Services budget, having already been deducted from the wider ERE budget (£394k).

Technology change

- New telephony software was successfully implemented in July 2025
- The implementation triggered the removal of call capping
 - This had previously applied to all lines other than Housing.
- Capping prevented an unmanageable number of callers entering the queue.
- Presented calls have increased by 22.7%
 - Previous average 5,500 per week
 - Current average 6,750 per week

Telephony demand breakdown by service

Housing Repairs + Housing Operations	33.7%
Council Tax Services	17.0%
General Enquiries	15.3%
Parking Services incl LTNs, concessionary travel	8.3%
Housing Benefit Services	7.1%
Homelessness	7.0%
Environmental Services	5.0%
School Admissions	2.1%
Planning and Building Control	1.6%
Libraries	1.3%
Registrars	1.0%
Electoral Services	0.5%
Facilities Management (internal repairs)	0.1%

Drivers of demand

- **Service delays / failures leading to repeat contacts**
 - Follow up or progress chasing
- **Reductions in other service areas**
 - Reduced staffing elsewhere drives calls/visits
- **Bulk letters/emails**
 - Creates a surge in demand esp on phones
- **Cost of living crisis**
 - Residents seeking help to manage bills
- **Digital services are too confusing or not available**
 - Where digital services are available, many are not end-to-end, so require staff intervention to complete

Impact

- **Angry, unhappy customers**

- We have similarly seen an increase in complaints
- Complaints received from March to April 2025 = 45
- Complaints received from June to July = 62 (37% increase)

- **Staff stress and sickness**

- Sickness is high, with 24.8 average sick days per staff member per year (6.7 days for stress/mental health)
- This adds further pressure to the remaining officers
- 80% of staff have had at least three sickness days in the last 12 months.

- **Poor service performance undermining channel shift**

- Phone demand reduces the resource available to respond to digital contact from webforms
- This in turn undermines our attempts to make online the most attractive and efficient channel to transact with the council.
- When residents have a poor digital experience, they resort to contacting us offline (phone and visit) and the pressure on staff persists.

Strategic solutions

- **Digital transformation**
 - Increase high-quality accessible self-service options, including automated end-to-end transactions via phone and the web.
 - Priorities are Housing; Council Tax; Parking; Benefits; Homelessness.
- **Channel shift communications**
 - Continuing to promote digital tools with every interaction with residents
 - Although some success has been achieved, a higher take-up could be possible there was resource available to promote them via targeted communications.
 - The new CRM launch will be accompanied by a communications plan.
- **Tackling service failure**
 - The Service Modernisation programme includes service redesign to tackle failure demand, which would significantly reduce contact to Customer Services.
 - Failure demand is when residents contact us due to service failure i.e. if we delivered the service right first time, there would have been no need to contact us.
- **Incentives and accountability**
 - Introduce dynamic recharging, where services pay more if demand increases over an agreed level, and pay less if demand decreases.

Initiatives delivered by Customer Services

- Eliminated the Housing Repairs manual logging email backlog (June 2025)
- Decommissioned the now defunct 'Homes for Haringey' mailboxes in CS (July 2025)
- Completed the transfer of on-street parking permit, blue badge and concessionary travel processing to Parking Service (29th Sept 2025)
- Co-location of Housing call takers at Broadwater Farm (aim is by end of 2025)
- Removal of customer service number from service web pages where CS unable to assist with query
- Work undertaken with Housing Repairs and Digital teams to implement an online form for follow up repairs, to go directly to the team who can resolve issues (dependent on CRM project)
- Requested Housing Income stagger bulk mailouts to reduce impact on demand, which is under review
- Implemented face-to-face appointments except for emergencies / those unable to use other channels.

Initiatives delivered by other services

- Upgrade to Taranto Parking system to improve the customer journey, making online applications simpler to complete (Aug 2025)
- Backlog of outstanding Housing Repairs jobs scheduled to bring the service into target (Sept 2025)
- Council tax bill explainer video published & promoted
- Additional funding secured to clear the Council Tax backlog which has generated significant failure demand
- Invest to save bids for doing channel shift communications have been submitted as part of the 26-27 budget setting process
- Homelessness Prevention Hub is being opened (*Q1 2026-27*)

Slides about the current Digital programme
(Service Modernisation) to follow