



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and Date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 12 JUNE 2024
Subject	CHANGES TO CUSTOMER TELEPHONE ACCESS TIMES
Wards Affected	All
Accountable Member	Councillor Alaric Smith – Executive Member for Finance. Email: alaric.Smith@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable Officer	Jon Dearing – Assistant Director, Resident Services and Interim Executive Director (Publica). Email: jon.dearing@publicagroup.uk
Report Author	Michelle Clifford – Business Manager, Customer Experience Email: michelle.clifford@publicagroup.uk
Purpose	The purpose of this report, in light of a continuous decline in customer demand, is to propose that the trial becomes a permanent arrangement following the data gathered. The trial of reduced telephone access hours from 9am – 2pm, to the public has proved the concept and customers are continuing to shift to digital channels.
Annexes	Annex A – Data Graphs Numbers 1 to 4. Annex B – Equalities Impact Assessment
Recommendation	That the Executive resolves to: I. Agree to adopt the reduced telephone access arrangements on a permanent basis.
Corporate Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Putting Residents First.
Key Decision	YES
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	All Internal Departments who were previously consulted ahead of the six-month trial period (Housing, Building Control, the Elections Teams, Members and the Customer Services Teams) and the Executive Member for Finance.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1** Over the last few years, the Council has been introducing new digital channels and improving those that already existed. This activity coincided with the Covid pandemic, where people accepted the use of alternative service access channels as a result of national restrictions. This resulted in a significant percentage of service requests coming through digital channels, which presented an opportunity for the Council to trial a reduction in the hours of opening for the customer contact centre. The trial has been successful as detailed in this report.
- 1.2** This report outlines the data, customer reaction and outcomes from the trial period. The assumption made prior to this, was that customers would change their routes to contact us and throughout the trial period this has been confirmed. The uptake in digital channels has helped to produce a further reduction in telephone calls and, over the last three year, an increase of 350% in the use of digital channels (see Annex A – Chart 1).

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1** In 2021 Resident Services restructured at the Business Manager level. One of the objectives of this change was to allow for a Business Manager dedicated to improving the customer experience. The resultant post of Business Manager for Customer Experience is responsible for leading the Customer Service Teams, improving digital access, redesigning processes to make them customer focussed and supporting Service Managers to performance manage.
- 2.2** This has led to the formation of a multi-skilled 'Channel Choice Team' and the team has continued to work on implementing and improving access to digital services throughout the trial. The Team has created and improved digital access around many processes, particularly in high volume contact areas such as Revenues and Benefits, Waste and Planning, with very high take up rates and this has continued to rise during the trial period of reduction in telephone opening hours. The Council now has more than 20% of households signed up to the Revenues and Benefits 'Open Portal' and this figure continues to increase.
- 2.3** Over the last three years the provision of more and improved digital customer access to services, the impact of the pandemic and the advancement of technology, has led to customers changing their service access habits. During the last three years (2021-2023) the volume of calls (WODC and CDC combined) has reduced by just over 37% (from 230,570 in 2021 to 144,063 in 2023). In the same period (again WODC and CDC combined) the use of digital forms has increased by 350% (from 32,842 in 2021 to 115,255 in 2023). The data from the trial has shown that the assumptions around channel shift were accurate. We are continuing to introduce new and improve upon existing digital offerings and take up continues to increase.
- 2.4** There are obviously variations in call volumes between WODC and CDC throughout the year, and as local initiatives/service changes are implemented; however (on average) the resource needs are almost identical.
- 2.5** It is important to note that if the trial period is to become a permanent arrangement that due to system configuration, any permanent changes to telephone access hours would need

to be mirror across the two Councils (West Oxfordshire District Council and Cotswold District Council).

3. MAIN POINTS

3.1 As a result of the changing customer needs and the resultant shift from telephone contact to digital contact, the Customer Services Management Team have undertaken extensive analysis of the telephone data. As well as the significant call volume reductions, the data shows:

- a) A large reduction in calls per week (see Annex A – Charts 2 and 2 (a)),
- b) Average Wait Times have decreased, as a result of the additional capacity during the busy lunchtime period (see Annex A – Chart 3),
- c) Abandonment rate reduced to single figures (see Annex A- Chart 4),
- d) Customer Satisfaction has improved. The Council has featured in the national top ten for telephone service customer satisfaction in almost every month of the trial and in March 2024 (by far the busiest month of the trial period) was in the top three.
- e) The Council has received only two formal complaints in relation to this service change. The complaints were not specific to the experience of the individuals; they were both contending that the change discriminates against the Council's elderly residents. The complaints were not upheld on the basis that the telephone service has not been removed, just reduced.

In addition, surveys show that staff morale has been positively affected and officers have stated that “we have more time to help customers who require more assistance”, that “we are improving the customer experience by answering the calls quicker”. The Customer Service Managers have commented that the shorter telephone access arrangements have provided them with more time to plan, train and interact with ‘back office’ teams more regularly.

3.2 Should the Council decide to adopt the changed telephone access arrangements on a permanent basis, this should lead to more success in recruitment as we can offer part time hours for those officers who want it as well as offering opportunities around childcare and school hours where appropriate.

3.3 The Out of Hours Service after 5pm remains unchanged externally and in-house provision is in place to take calls between 2pm and 5pm for:

- Reporting dangerous structures (and other life-threatening events). These are very rare, but will always require cover,
- Assisting those who are presenting as homeless or are under the threat of homelessness, and
- Support for residents in the lead-up to an election.

During the trial period, there has been an average of 3 calls per day after 2pm and 87% of these have been in relation to homelessness.

With regards to elections, this will be addressed by a separate (temporary) telephone line that will only be available and resourced in the lead-up to an election (precise timings to be agreed with the Returning Officer and Elections Services Manager).

When customers call after 2pm, they are advised of the new opening hours and given information on how to access services on-line and what to do in an emergency. For non-emergency matters all other channels such as face to face (9am to 5pm every week day), email and the wide range of digital services will be available as normal.

- 3.4** The implementation of these permanent changes will allow most future recruitments to be on a 9am to 2pm basis, creating ongoing efficiency savings. The commitment to effect this change without any mandatory redundancies remains in place. During the trial period the excess hours within the Customer Service Team has been used to help other Services reduce their outstanding workloads; in particular Revenues and Benefits and the Housing Service where demand is high as a result of the Cost-of-Living Crisis. The improvement in performance in those Services means that the need for customers to make repeat calls has reduced; therefore further reducing telephone call volumes and improving the broader Customer Experience.
- 3.5** During the trial the challenging time for the team was March and April 2024 due to the impact of Garden Waste renewals, Benefit Uprating and Annual Billing all creating customer contact at the same time. During this period the waiting times and abandoned rates were compromised (see Annex A – Chart 4). Council Tax Annual Billing and Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support Uprating are statutory services and therefore governed by statutory timeframes. However, proposals will shortly be brought forward to mitigate the impact of Green Waste renewals at this busy time of the year; to take effect from 2025. It is worth noting that the number of Green Waste calls, during our busiest week (w/c 18th March 2024) exceeded the number of abandoned calls in that week; and that week included a four-hour period with no payments system (due to nationwide issues with the provider) which created additional calls. Taking these two factors into account, the Business Manager for Customer Experience is confident that that the Service can cope with reduced telephone access times during the Annual Billing/Benefit Uprating period in the future.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1** In the original report proposing the trial period, excluding the Managers and Officers required for the Face to Face visits at the Welch Way Office, each of the 30 Customer Service Officers across WODC and CDC (24.93 fte) will have a reduction in hours of 0.32 fte. This reduction across the 30 Officers equates to a total reduction of 7.98 fte. This makes the total efficiency saving £238,100 to be shared equally between WODC and CDC, but we are on track to achieve £250,000. So, the total **saving for each council will be £125,000 per annum.**
- 4.2** The first £50,000 per annum (per Council) was projected for delivery in 2023/24 and has been achieved subject to the approval of this recommendation. The remaining £75,000 per annum (per Council) will be delivered in 2024/25. However, it should be noted that more than £50,000 (per Council) has already been identified. It should be noted that these savings have already been taken account of within the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy.

4.3 As there will be no redundancies, the cost of implementation will be supporting service resources and will therefore fall within existing budgets.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no Legal implications associated with these recommendations.

6. RISK ASSESSMENT

6.1 There is a risk in not agreeing the recommendations, in that the Council would miss an opportunity to make services more efficient and we would have to recruit to the current vacant posts rather than offer them as an efficiency saving.

6.2 The data shows that the reduction in telephone access opening hours appears not to have affected the Council's reputation. However, feedback and complaints processes will continue to be monitored.

7. EQUALITIES IMPACT

7.1 No services or service access channels have been taken away, so the impact has been minimal. An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed and shared with the Council's Director of Governance and Monitoring Officer as per Annexe B.

7.2 Encouraging even further shifts to digital and self-serve channels will create even more capacity for Teams to provide support to those customers in the greatest need.

8. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

8.1 The recommendation does not have any climate change implications.

9. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

9.1 The Council could decide not to make the arrangement permanent, however, this would fail to recognise the customer shift to digital access channels and would miss an opportunity to evolve to reflect changing patterns of behaviour as well as generate any savings.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1 None.

(END)