



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 13 SEPTEMBER 2023
Subject	TELEPHONE CHANNEL ACCESS
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Councillor Dan Levy, Executive Member for Finance. Email: Dan.Levy@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Jon Dearing, Assistant Director for Resident Services Email: Jon.Dearing@publicagroup.uk
Report author	Michelle Clifford, Business Manager for Customer Experience Email: Michelle.Clifford@publicagroup.uk
Summary/Purpose	The purpose of this report is to outline the Council's success in supporting the shift in customer demand to digital channels and to consider adjusting telephone access hours as part of a balanced approach to customer contacts that responds to customer preferences.
Annexes	Annex A – Equalities Impact Assessment
Recommendation(s)	<i>That the Executive resolves to:</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><i>1. Agree the reduced telephone access hours, on a trial basis, with effect from Monday 16th October 2023, and</i><i>2. Receive a further report, detailing the findings and recommendations from the trial, to an Executive meeting in the first quarter of 2024/25.</i>
Corporate priorities	Putting Residents First
Key Decision	NO, as the recommendations are in relation to a trial period.
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	Internal.

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1** In 2021 Resident Services restructured at the Business Manager level. One of the objectives of this change was 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, making processes customer focussed and improving performance.
- 1.2** This has led to the formation of a multi-skilled Channel Choice Team. This Team has been working to implement/improve access to digital services. The Team have created/improved digital access around many processes with very high take up rates. Examples include Green Waste sign-up, Bulky Waste, Licensing Applications, Fly Tipping and Abandoned Vehicle reporting, Planning Validation and implementation of the 'Open Portal' where customers can self-serve in relation to Housing Benefit and Council Tax services.
- 1.3** There is more to do and current focus is on improving the Chatbot on the Council's Website, improving the usability of Web pages, increasing take up of the 'Open Portal' and making Waste container ordering simpler.
- 1.4** Over the last three years the provision of more and improved digital customer access to services, coupled with the impact of the pandemic which imposed access restrictions, has led to customers changing their service access habits.
- 1.5** The volume of calls (WODC and CDC combined) fell by 23% between 2021 and 2022, to 191,031. During this period the volume of Web Form utilised by customers tripled to over 98,000. This shift of contact method continues into 2023 when, for the first time, we have seen digital access volumes exceed telephone access volumes in the first half of the year.
- 1.6** This report, therefore, recommends that the Council's resources are realigned to reflect the change in customer behaviour.

The Council is also investing in improvements to the customer receptions at the Welch Way offices and the Wood Green offices so that effective face to face access is available for those who need it and will continue.

- 1.7** It is important to note that, due to system configuration, any changes to telephone access would need to be mirror across the two Councils (WODC and CDC).

2. MAIN POINTS

- 2.1** 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) Telephone lines are busiest earlier in the day, with the busiest period being between 9am and 10am,

- b) Based on the most recent data, call volumes reduce steadily throughout the day; with the last hour of the day volumes being only 45% of the first hour of the day,
- c) Mondays and Tuesdays are the busiest days with Wednesdays seeing the least volume of calls throughout the average week, and
- d) Wait times increase between 12pm and 2pm, as almost 50% of the workforce are taking a lunch break throughout that period.

2.2 The conclusions drawn from the increase in digital contact, the reduction in telephone call volumes and the call patterns described in paragraph 2.1 are that:

- (a) It is time to shift resources away from the telephone channel, while still maintaining that channel every working day and for a significant part of the day,
- (b) Telephone access reductions should be in the afternoons when call volumes reduce, and
- (c) Increasing and improving digital access is where more resources should be focussed in the future.

2.3 What the data does not show is what the reaction of the customers will be. Based on the experiences of other organisations (public and private sector) it is anticipated that a reduction in call access times will result in a further shift to digital channels. In order to test this assumption it is recommended that we enter into the new arrangements as a trial and collect data on demand, waiting times, channel shift, customer satisfaction and customer complaints. This data will then inform a further report around whether the new telephone opening hours should be made permanent.

2.4 The data tells us demand falls after 2pm and the recommendation is therefore to close front and back office telephone lines at 2pm every day. This uniform approach will make messaging more straightforward and improve our recruitment opportunities; making posts more attractive to those that need to work around school hours.

2.5 It is intended that the Out of Hours Service will not change and still commence at 5pm every day. The cost of providing an external Out of Hours service from 2pm every day would outweigh the financial savings and therefore hamper our ability to deliver on our customers' digital access needs. However, there are three services that will need 2pm to 5pm cover. They are:

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

The first two of those are year-round requirements and will be resolved by introducing an emergency line between 2pm and 5pm. The management of this line will be closely managed so that we don't have non-urgent contacts taking up this vital resource.

The election issue will be addressed by a separate (temporary) telephone line that will only be available and resourced in the lead-up to an election. The Customer Service Managers

will meet with Elections Teams to draw up a plan specific to each election but resources can be sourced at very short notice for this task, or any emergency event, and the mechanism for this is explained in 2.6 below.

When customers attempt to telephone after 2pm they will be given information on how to access services on-line. They will also be given information on what to do in an emergency. For non-emergency matters other channels, such as face to face, email and the wide range of digital services will be available as normal.

2.6 The implementation of these changes will clearly require a reduction in working hours for many of our Customer Service Officers (some Officers will continue full time as Managers, Reception, Front Office and some technical Officers will be required all day). There has been a commitment to effect this change without any mandatory redundancies and there are three key ways in which we will achieve this:

- i. Where an officer wishes to voluntarily reduce their hours, this will be agreed,
- ii. Where a vacancy occurs we will recruit to the post 9am to 2pm, and
- iii. When we have future 'back office' vacancies we will fill them (where appropriate) with the 2pm to 5pm Customer Service Officer resource. So (for example) a full-time Licensing vacancy might be filled by two/three Customer Service Officers. This approach will not work in every service area but will in enough to allow us to absorb those excess hours.

The approach described in bullet point iii (above) has several advantages:

- It means that we will not need to make any redundancies,
- We will get customer focussed officers working in the back office,
- We will improve the back office knowledge of our Customer Service Officers, and
- We will have an instant Customer Service resource that we can second (full-time) back in the Telephone Service should they be required. This will mean a temporary reduction in back office capacity but as the back office Services will have gained some capacity from reducing direct telephone access 2pm-5pm, this should more than balance that capacity issue.

2.7 During the trial period the excess hours within the Customer Service Team will be used to help other Services reduce their outstanding workloads. This will reduce the need for customers to make repeat calls and therefore, further, reduce telephone call volumes.

2.8 This change is intended to meet the changing needs of our customers. No change to other access channels (including Face to Face) are being proposed. The Welch Way and Woodgreen receptions will continue to be available 9am to 5pm every weekday.

2.9 The recommendations propose that a further report be made in quarter 1 of 2024/25, with details of the outcomes the data collection exercise that will have taken place during the trial. This is the point at which the decision will be made as to whether the change is made permanent or not.

2.10 A Communications plan is being developed, so that customers are aware of the changes and the reasoning. This will include amendments to Web pages, documents and signage.

3. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

3.1 The Council could decide not to reduce the telephone opening hours. However, this would fail to recognise the customer shift to digital access channels and would miss an opportunity to make the Council more efficient.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1 The way in which the Council's services are accessed has been changing for several years. The data shows that telephone access has been declining significantly, while digital access increases. The recommendations reflect the changing needs of our customers while maintaining all forms of access.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Excluding the Managers and Face to Face Officers (mentioned above) each of the 30 Customer Service Officers (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. So the total **saving to WODC is £119,050** per annum.

5.2 The first £50,000 per annum of this will be delivered in 2023/24 and the remainder (£69,050 per annum) in 2024/25.

5.3 The Service has already started to fill vacancies on reduced hours and is holding some vacancies. This will allow the 2023/24 target to be met during the trial period.

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

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no Legal implications associated with the recommendation.

7. RISK ASSESSMENT

7.1 There is a risk in not agreeing the recommendation, in that the Council would miss an opportunity to make services more efficient.

7.2 The reduction in telephone access opening hours could bring a reputational risk. However, the Council would be maintaining all forms of access and better meeting the changing needs of its customers.

8. EQUALITIES IMPACT

8.1 No services or service access channels are being taken away, so the impact is minimal. An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed and shared with the Council's Director of Governance.

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

9. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

9.1 The recommendation does not have any climate change implications.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1 None.

(END)