

Agenda Request from Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee

“Reasons for Performance Downturn and Targets being Missed, Action Plans and Activity to Redress.”

Please accept my apologies that I am unable to attend the meeting on 31 October as I will be on planned leave. Please find a written report below and an assurance that I will attend a future meeting on request, if further discussion is required.

Joanne Crookes

1. Customer Service Performance

The Customer Services Team on the front-line answer a wide variety of calls and a huge number of enquiries as referenced in the Council's Quarterly Performance Report.

Half year 2024-2025 - Calls answered 85,720, E-mails dealt with 12,917.

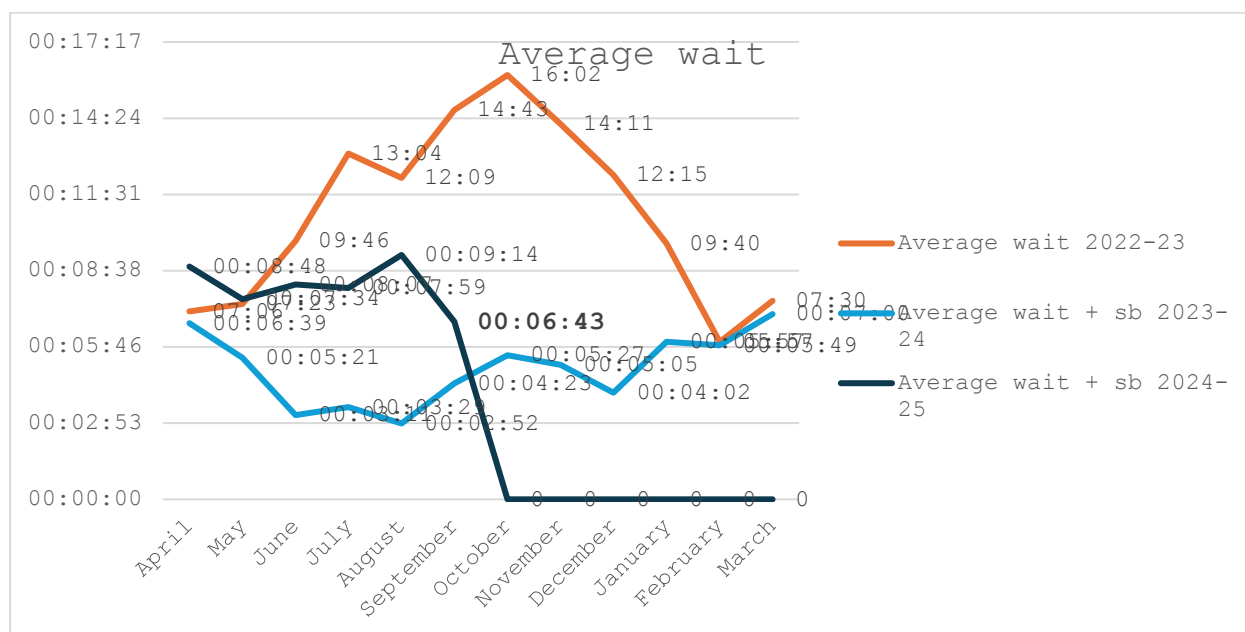
Service Purpose and Call Quality:

Customer Service Advisors (CSAs) provide a response to customer enquiries and are trained and monitored on the quality of the interaction and the service provided. Residents call about a range of issues from the simple repair requests or checking their rent balance to discussions about difficulty paying their rent, neighbour nuisance, domestic abuse and their struggles with mental health.

The focus is always on the quality of the response, and all team members endeavour to resolve as many issues as possible during the course of the call. CSAs are trained to deliver a service to customers, they need to spend time diagnosing the problem and doing what they can to seek a solution and put the solution in place. Each call comes with a requirement to add notes to a system recording action taken, possibly book an appointment, refer to a specialist officer for advice or complete a report for further investigation.

CSAs work as efficiently as possible but are not expected to prioritise handling calls quickly over supporting customer needs. Meaningful calls take time. The average call length is nearly 7 minutes, but many calls last much longer than this.

Call Waiting Times:



The average call wait time in September 2024 was 6 minutes and 43 seconds. This is an improvement on the previous month and on the waiting times experienced in Quarter one. A number of variables affect the length of call waiting times:

- **IT Systems** – Older systems and demand on the network can often affect the ability of CSAs to use the software that they need to process calls, either waiting for the system to load during the call or needing to be actioned later. Developments with new, modern applications and some changes to the IT infrastructure will address many of these issues. There can be occasions where legacy systems are affected and totally unavailable for a period of time.
- **Demand** – Rotas are data led to have more staff during busiest times. Large numbers of calls from residents are received on Mondays and mornings are generally busier than afternoons. Part-time staff are concentrated in morning shifts and at the start of the week, however this can leave afternoon calls vulnerable to long waits if service is affected by staff absence. Calls to the contact centre generally reflect what is happening locally and nationally and can result in an increase in calls chasing progress when there are backlogs in service areas or increased awareness of an issue or promotion of support available. Peak in demand can also be evidenced when there are mailshots, rent statements, review letters etc. Reports on the national or local news will lead to calls making enquiries and asking for explanations, for example the high publicity surrounding the loss of the winter fuel payment.
- **Staffing levels.** Customer Services is an entry level role at the council and staff recruited and trained by the team become highly skilled communicators who have a very broad understanding of all the services delivered by the council. This can lead to experienced team members moving off into new opportunities at the council and to external partners. The team often frequently operates with reduced staff numbers compared to the establishment. During September, the

service had an almost full staff rota, however in October another staff member has been successfully appointed to a new role in DHI.

- The relatively high attrition rates mean that the team often works with staff who are in training. These staff are naturally slower than more experienced staff who know what they are doing, have contacts that they can refer issues to; and have the experience to quickly find solutions to problems. New staff in training also affects the experienced staff who may be called upon to share their wisdom in more complicated calls.
- The complexity of calls and the variety of challenges being experienced by our residents means that the calls are more difficult to resolve. CSAs are dealing with customers who have a range of problems, from struggling with the cost of living, to issues with mental health and a lack of support from their own network or from statutory agencies. Some of the calls and some of the callers are so challenging that staff need to have a pause between calls to get back on track, make onward referrals be ready to deal with the next call.

2. Mitigation for the Delay in Call Response.

Call-Backs

The main mitigation to a longer call wait that can be offered, along with the reassurance that the call will not be rushed and closed down when callers do get to speak to an adviser, is the offer of a Call-Back. This is a system increasingly used across call-centres, particularly those that can experience peaks and troughs in demand throughout the day. There are a number of ways that Call-Back systems can be tailored to suit the particular circumstances of the contact centre. This is how it currently works for the council.

- a. When a customer rings the contact centre they get an automated greeting. This confirms that they are through to the council and informs them that the call is recorded plus details of our Privacy Notice.
- b. They are then told their position in the queue. E.g. "You are fourth in the queue." There are played hold music and some comfort messages apologising for the wait are played.
- c. After waiting 5 minutes (300 seconds) they are given the option to request a call-back. The system holds their place in the queue and when they reach the number one position the adviser is presented with a number to call.

The Call-Back option is quite popular, and some people are very used to the system, for example when calling their GP, and they will request a Call-Back and carry on about their day, confident in the knowledge that they will get a Call-Back. Call-backs will always be made as the system does not allow them to be forgotten. The system works well, with only occasional issues when customers leave the wrong number, don't answer the incoming call, or are engaged when a CSA rings. Another call back will be attempted before closing the contact down.

Some customers circumvent the current process and request a Call-Back straight away. However, Call-Backs need to be balanced with advisor availability and cost and at the moment 5 minutes is recommended as a reasonable wait time before offering a call back.

Most customers do not notify us that they find the wait to get through to a human call-taker excessive. Many people now have phone contracts, either mobile or landline which covers their phone-calls in an all-inclusive cost package. A few minutes of waiting to get through to an advisor does not result in additional charges to them and when they get through the expectation is that they will get a good experience.

Action Plan to Redress

To make further efficiencies there continues to be an aim to move transactions from phone to online wherever possible. This has had some notable success, particularly in areas such as payments, Garden Waste Subscription and Council Tax queries. This “Channel Shift” agenda has recognised that there is a balance to be made between keeping it easy for people to get through on the phone and encouraging customers with routine and easy to self-serve transactions to go on-line instead.

Improvements to website content will make this transition more achievable and this is in progress. IT system improvements, including aligning functions where possible, reducing the need for staff to use multiple systems in order to resolve an enquiry.

It is recognised that although further channel shift will lead to improvements in customer experience and accessibility, Lincoln has 5 of the top 10 and 8 of the top 20 most digitally deprived areas in Lincolnshire. There will be a continued demand from customers for face to face or telephone interactions to support them, which support vulnerable residents and take time to resolve.