



Responding to Our Customers



A report from Overview & Scrutiny





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Reports that have been submitted to Council can be downloaded from www.birmingham.gov.uk/scrutiny.



Preface

By Cllr Carl Rice, Chair, Co-ordinating O&S Committee

Scrutiny in Birmingham is underpinned by four principles which are set out in our Constitution:

- a) Providing “critical friend” challenge to executive policy-makers and decision-makers;
- b) Enabling the voice and concerns of the public and its communities to be heard;
- c) Is carried out by ‘independent minded members’ who lead and own the scrutiny process;
- d) Driving improvement in public services.

However, sometimes the second of these – the voice of the public – has not been as loud as it should be. This report is unashamedly citizen focussed and whilst we appreciate the challenges faced by City Council Directorates, particularly in recent months, getting our basic services right has to be our top priority.

The Co-ordinating O & S Committee will ensure that the scrutiny process will continue to be the voice of Birmingham citizens who simply want the Council to do what it says it will do – collect our rubbish, repair our streets and maintain our parks and open spaces– on time and to a reasonable standard. This report looks at those areas in some detail and proposes a range of recommendations to better enable the Council to meet the needs of those it serves.

This report is not the end of our inquiry, but the start of a process that puts customer services at the heart of what scrutiny does. We will continue to monitor how key Council services are performing in the future, and report back to Councillors with an analysis on why failures are occurring and crucially, what improvement measures are required.

Councillor Carl Rice
Chair, Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Summary of Recommendations

Ref	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R01	<p>That a Council-wide approach and vision for customer services is agreed and owned by all directorates.</p> <p>This should include an explanation of the consequences of failure to meet the performance standards set out in the approach.</p>	Deputy Leader	May 2021
R02	<p>That a review of all telephone and on-line access is undertaken across the council to understand the customer experience and how it can be improved. This should lead to a consistent platform for telephone and on-line engagement, and standardised performance measures across the Council.</p>	Deputy Leader	May 2021
R03	<p>a) That each customer-facing service area publishes customer data on a regular basis, alongside other performance information, so citizens and Members can see the "end to end" performance.</p> <p>Directorates should be able to demonstrate how this information is used in service improvement.</p>	Deputy Leader	May 2021
R04	<p>That the measure of customer satisfaction is reviewed, to either reflect those who report a "good" experience, or an alternative measure used. Officers should also explore working with the LGA to agree a standard measure of customer satisfaction to allow proper benchmarking across Councils.</p>	Deputy Leader	May 2021
R05	<p>Whilst many employees do a good job in helping residents, Directorates should be supported in making the necessary changes to tackle residual culture and behaviour that does not put the customer first. As there was evidence of this in waste management, the delayed management restructure should be completed urgently.</p>	Deputy Leader Cabinet Member, Street Scene and Parks	May 2021
R06	<p>That an escalation mechanism is built into the revised approach to enquiries and complaints across <u>all</u> council service areas, to include root cause analysis of problems and complaints, with clear management action taken to rectify them.</p> <p>This should include reporting back to members as to the progress of enquiries, so they are not obliged to chase for responses.</p>	Deputy Leader	May 2021



Ref	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R07	<p>That information sharing with Members is improved to enable them to answer queries from residents, particularly with regards to waste and highways.</p> <p>In the case of missed waste collections, Ward Councillors should be sent the list collated by the depots at the end of the day of missed roads/ properties to enable them to advise residents accordingly.</p> <p>Members should also receive reports from the contact centre about the enquiries/ complaints in their ward to give visibility on what citizens are raising with the Council.</p>	<p>Deputy Leader</p> <p>Cabinet Member, Street Scene and Parks</p>	May 2021
R08	That each service area reviews what information could be shared on the website in a more timely manner, to assist in reducing calls and complaints to the contact centre.	Deputy Leader	May 2021
R09	That Cabinet and senior leadership must ensure that customer data is used in performance monitoring and to drive policy and investment decisions. A report should be brought to this Committee, setting out how this will be achieved, including a mechanism for ensuring each decision considers the impact on citizen experience.	Deputy Leader	March 2021
R10	<p>That the preferred option for Member enquiries is pursued, subject to the findings set out above; and that a draft of the protocol is brought to the committee for comment and review before it is agreed.</p> <p>Within that, there should be a clear set of options for Members dependent on the type of enquiry.</p>	Deputy Leader	May 2021
R11	<p>Progress towards achievement of these recommendations should be reported to the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee no later than March 2021. Subsequent progress reports will be scheduled by the Committee thereafter, until all recommendations are implemented.</p> <p>In addition, the Co-ordinating O&S Committee will have regular monitoring reports on customer services matters beyond the tracking of this report.</p>	Deputy Leader of the Council	March 2021



1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose

- 1.1.1 Focusing on the things that matter to our citizens should be at the core of council business, but too often this does not appear to be the case when we look at how requests and complaints to the Council are dealt with. The Co-ordinating O&S Committee was aware that work was underway to improve the council's response to citizens and agreed, at its meeting in July 2019, to support that with a piece of work focusing on key service areas. The question members sought to answer was:

How can BCC improve the experience of those using council services?

- 1.1.2 There were initially three key areas to this work:

1. **The call-centre and councillor enquiries:** to understand current performance and identify any areas for improvement;
2. **Service Delivery:** three service areas were identified using data provided by the Customer Services team (including complaints and councillor queries), which could then be explored in detail to get to the root cause of the problem and therefore identify areas for improvement;
3. **Engagement with citizens:** to understand how engagement with citizens is currently carried out, both to inform services but also to encourage participation in decision-making.

- 1.1.3 Following a motion to Full Council earlier that month, a fourth line of enquiry was agreed:

4. **Member enquiries:** to investigate how members' enquiries are responded to with a view to proposing a new protocol for responses to members' enquiries.

- 1.1.4 This report examines the first, second and fourth of these areas; the third will be looked at in the current municipal year.

1.2 Methodology

- 1.2.1 The Committee undertook a series of evidence gathering sessions between October 2019 and January 2020, with a further session in September 2020. Members agreed to focus on three key service areas with the highest level of resident contact: waste collection, housing and highways. They spoke to officers in both the service areas and in the Customer Services team. Members would like to thank all those who contributed for their full and frank participation in these sessions.
- 1.2.2 A draft report was being prepared when the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted business as usual and resources were focused elsewhere. This report therefore describes the findings of the evidence gathering, but also takes stock of what has happened since following additional evidence gathering,



updating the evidence as needed. The recommendations set out in this report therefore take account of what has been learnt during this unprecedented time.



2 Key Findings

2.1 The Service Areas

- 2.1.1 In order to fully understand how citizen enquiries and complaints were being dealt with, and to understand the root causes of problems that members were dealing with through their ward case work on a regular basis, the Committee agreed to focus on three service areas – waste collection, housing and highways. These areas had the highest levels of resident contact with the City Council.
- 2.1.2 An in-depth session was held on each service area, with officers from both the service and the Customer Services team attending. As well as data from the Customer Services team, members submitted case studies to enable them to track the progress of an enquiry, the issues encountered and how they were responded to.
- 2.1.3 The findings from each of these sessions is set out below, and the final chapter draws together the main findings.

2.2 Customer Services

- 2.2.1 The Customer Services team is responsible for developing the Citizen Access Strategy, and for managing the contact centre and BRUM account for on-line contacts. The contact centre receives two million telephone calls and approximately 60,000 emails a year and is therefore the largest touch-point the council has with users of council services. Customer Services is also responsible for the website and online customer service delivery. The website was completely re-built in 2016 and receives 46 millionpage views per annum. The BRUM Account is being phased in to increase the opportunities for citizens to use on-line options if they wish. Not all council services are connected through the Customer Services team.
- 2.2.2 The most recent data on customer satisfaction is attached in Appendix 1. This shows that when customers were asked to rate their overall experience when they contacted the council, just under half said that their experience was “good” between July 2019 and February 2020. For the following four months, the percentage rating their experience as “good” rose to just over a half. Between 25% and 41% rated their experience as “poor”.
- 2.2.3 Members noted that customer “satisfaction” is being reported as a combination of the “good” and “average” scores. People who report that their experience is “average” are not satisfied and therefore should not be included in this measure, or an alternative measure should be used.
- 2.2.4 The Committee also noted that there was no benchmarking information available, partly because councils measure satisfaction in different ways. The Council should work with the LGA to develop standard best practice measures as this is such a vital area of local government performance.



- 2.2.5 Members agreed that the Customer Services team had been doing good work in improving the interface between citizens and services areas and welcomed the development of a Citizen Access Strategy (see paragraphs 2.2.13-2.2.15) which would further improve responses. However, there was still much work to be done.
- 2.2.6 Members saw how moving calls to the **Contact Centre** has seen real improvements in call-handling in those service areas (e.g. Tenancy and Estates Management, Highways – see below).
- 2.2.7 Members also heard about improvements to the **website**, including improvements being made in trialling web chat; introducing self-service appointments for different services (e.g. housing); and launching a new feature whereby residents will be able to pinpoint issues on a map e.g. fly-tipping or potholes.
- 2.2.8 Members also welcomed the introduction of **Resolution Champions**, who act as an intermediary between citizen and service area. These are sometimes physically based with the services, for example in Waste they were based in the depots to work directly with waste officers. They are a very useful conduit between service and customer service team and can drill down into repeated failure.
- 2.2.9 However, whilst these changes were welcomed, and some improvements have been noted, there is still some way to go. There are still issues that Members and customers have to raise repeatedly as well as instances of no or poor responses. Members noted that there was only so much the Customer Services team could do where there were problems in the service itself as they need both the intelligence and the response from the service area to effect change. However, there needs to be a stronger response where services are failing. Members therefore proposed the need for a process for **escalation** of recurring issues to management for action and for greater transparency in data sharing.
- 2.2.10 There is also an issue with communication back to Members where they raise an enquiry, as they are not always informed when a Resolution Champion is involved in a matter where repeated concerns have been raised. Members should be kept informed on the progress so that they are not required to constantly chase for information.

Response to Covid-19 Pandemic

- 2.2.11 The Committee heard at its July 2020 meeting how the Customer Services team and Contact Centre have been heavily involved in responding to the crisis and ensuring that an appropriate level of service was provided to citizens of Birmingham. The contact centre continued to operate a full service as well as set up a new emergency helpline responding to Covid-19 specific enquiries. Key areas of activity included:
- The Covid emergency line: set up on 30 March, it required approximately 30 members of staff to be mobilised, trained and prepared to answer a variety of COVID-19 related calls where citizens have required support on a new emergency line. Most queries to the hub were food related, whether that be via the shielded route or the voluntary sector (The Active Wellbeing



Society (TAWS)) route. Since the emergency line has opened, 10,674 calls have been received into the line with answer rates of 99%, plus 514 submissions to the online form.

- Over 40,000 outbound calls: carried out by the contact centre since March 2020. These included:
 - activity in relation to following up those citizens who registered with central government requiring assistance;
 - activity in relation to those citizens who were shielding but had not registered with central government – validation exercise to check if they did require assistance;
 - ad-hoc follow up activity when central government made us aware of access issues to properties when delivering food parcels.
- Working in partnership with the Fire Service to arrange safe and well checks for 1,494 citizens;
- An outbound exercise to contact small businesses that had not applied for small business grants and more recently an inbound line was mobilised to handle calls enquiring about the discretionary business grant funding.¹

2.2.12 Members noted the speed and efficiency with which the contact centre moved to a home-based operation. It was a major exercise and all involved were congratulated.

Citizen Access Strategy

2.2.13 The **Citizen Access Strategy** sets out all access points into the council and how these are managed and responded to. As the Committee was made aware last year, this is undergoing a refresh to ensure the Council can continue to meet the changing needs of citizens and respond to new technology.

2.2.14 Currently a mapping exercise is underway to look at all 1,700 services provided by the council and understand the customer experience. Some rationalisation may result – there are at least 300 numbers that are live and published outside the contact centre. Members welcomed this approach but noted the need to retain multiple channels.

2.2.15 A number of engagement sessions and workshops took place throughout December 2019 and January 2020 to start the conversation and seek feedback on Councillors and Citizens experiences in all things relating to citizen access. This was paused because of the pandemic and will be restarted once the emergency has lifted.²

Complaints and Member Enquiry Handling Review

2.2.16 In response to complaints, and feedback from the Co-ordinating O&S Committee, the service commissioned an external review of complaints and Member enquiry handling.

¹ Further information is available in a [report](#) to the Co-ordinating O&S Committee on 3rd July 2020

² Ibid.



- 2.2.17 The objective of the review was to be able to provide options to improve the complaints, compliments and comments processes, systems and organisation to maximise citizen satisfaction in a cost effective manner. It also looked at providing options to improve the members portal, member enquiry and councillor complaint enquiry functions that are currently in place across the Council.
- 2.2.18 Workshops were held with each Directorate and Councillors throughout November 2019 and January 2020 and every service area has been encouraged to provide representatives who are involved in the daily complaints processes. Teams were given the opportunity to provide comments and feedback to help shape and influence any recommendations for improvements.
- 2.2.19 The review found that there is a lack of focus on the citizen with no consistent approach, a lot of complaints go unrecorded and the volumes included in reporting do not reflect the true volumes. Duplication often occurs when different teams respond to the same complaint. In addition, failings that result in complaints are not resolved.
- 2.2.20 This was reported to the Co-ordinating O&S Committee in July 2020, and members welcomed the publication of the findings as an open and honest assessment of the current situation.
- 2.2.21 A Steering Group of cross-directorate Senior Managers has evaluated the best option to rescue the Council from this crisis. Their preferred option is to create a virtual complaints teams located within each Directorate (with a small central team providing support). This central team will govern one complaints system and complaints process with standardised complaints teams embedded within each Directorate.³

2.3 Waste Collection

- 2.3.1 At the time of the evidence gathering session in October 2019, the service that received the most complaints and enquiries was waste collection. The contact centre received around 160,000 telephone calls per year regarding waste matters. A year on, that was down to 130,000 calls per year. On-line reports of missed collection have also reduced. The table below sets out a comparison over the last three years (January to August) of calls and missed collections logged.

Table 1: January to August Contact Centre Calls (Waste) and Missed Collection Reports

Year	Calls into Contact Centre	Missed Collections Logged at Contact Centre	Missed Collections Logged Online	Total Missed Logged	% Missed Logged Online
Jan-Aug 2018	111,443	28,824	33,966	62,790	54%
Jan-Aug 2019	126,046	43,707	76,887	146,604	52%
Jan-Aug 2020	72,002	15,032	20,899	35,931	58%

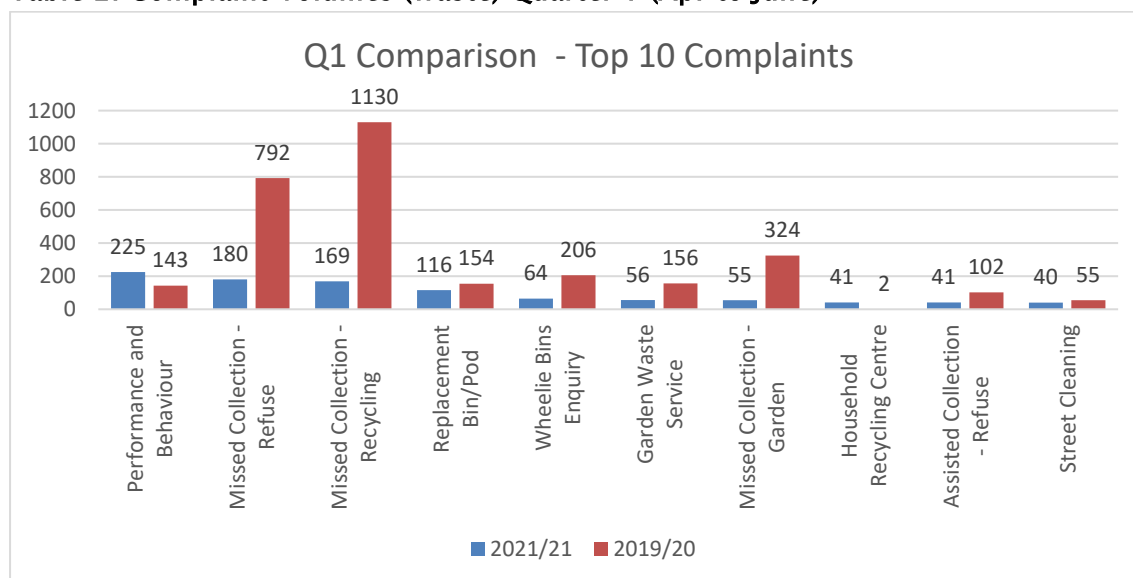
³ Ibid.



2.3.2 At the time of the evidence gathering session (October 2019), complaints were also high (3,165 complaints logged during April – June 2019). A year on, that number had also reduced, to 1,123 complaints logged during Quarter 1 of this year (April – June 2020).

2.3.3 Table 2 below sets out the reasons for complaints in April, May and June 2019.

Table 2: Complaint Volumes (Waste) Quarter 1 (Apr to June)



2.3.4 The reason for the high number of complaints at the time of the evidence gathering largely stemmed from the knock-on effect of the industrial action the previous year. A new working model had been introduced which had an impact on the operation of the service, particularly with regards to the completion of new rounds, which were still bedding in at that time. Staff shortages and vehicle breakdowns were also major issues.

2.3.5 The Customer Services team has been working closely with the Waste service to support improved responses to missed collections to citizens since 2016. Changes included the introduction of Resolution Champions, working in the three largest waste depots: Perry Barr, Lifford and Redfern. This closer working had proved to be a success with staff able to escalate repeat enquires immediately in the depot and provide feedback to the contact centre and citizens on issues in a timelier manner. This meant that there was improved resolution to complaints and access to up to date information for enquiries. The process the Resolution Champions follow when dealing with enquiries from Members is set out in Appendix 2. However, members were still able to give instances of where reports and complaints had not been responded to or where the same properties or streets were being repeatedly missed, causing huge frustration to residents.

2.3.6 Members held a second evidence-gathering session on waste in September 2020 and were told that the situation had much improved, though access issues still caused problems (one illegally parked car, for example, can prevent a waste vehicle getting down a street and collecting the rubbish). Not



only had complaints and missed collections reduced, but trust and confidence were being rebuilt with residents, particularly during the pandemic as staff received support and praise from residents (including thank you messages on bins) for continuing to work through the lock-down.

2.3.7 However, again members reported that whilst the overall picture had improved, there were still areas of persistent failure, including repeated missed collections in the same streets – the same issues as were being reported a year ago. The reasons for that were explored in the September session and the following actions were proposed:

- Completing the delayed management restructure is required urgently, which would give more capacity at that level to take a wider view and think strategically and to problem solve. There is also an urgent need to tackle the residual culture and behaviour that does not put the customer first.
- Continuing to improve communication from depot staff in reporting issues. Some of this has been down to a lack of co-operation from depot staff, and Business Support officers and depot managers are working to improve this position. Alongside this, a problem-solving approach to understanding why repeat problems are happening should be encouraged.
- Communication and reporting will also be improved with the new vehicles, which will have the “slab in the cab” technology integrated. Managers will work with the crews to train them to use these in a phased approach. This technology will give visibility on missed collections and missed assisted collections and will provide more useful data than the current measure of missed collections (which relies on reporting by the resident).
- Tackling longer term issues, including working with the Planning and Regeneration service to ensure that new builds are designed to take into account bin storage and vehicle access.
- Publishing a clearer policy for residents so they are clear about how to present waste and recycling.

2.4 Housing Services

2.4.1 In November 2019, the Committee looked at three areas of the housing service where call volumes were relatively high: tenancy management, housing repairs and housing options.

2.4.2 **Tenancy Management** moved to the contact centre in May 2019, and consequently there was an improvement in call-handling. The first 4 months (June to September 2019) saw 93% of calls being handled (30,881 out of 33,184 calls) compared to 79% (29,742 out of 37,481 calls) in the same period in the previous year. Comparing pre and post transfer abandoned call rates, the team abandoned 5,436 fewer calls in the same four-month period. Overall average time to answer calls has reduced from around four minutes to one minute proving a much-improved citizen experience. Daily service levels are met with only a handful of days falling below the 90% target. These



improvements have continued with every month for the remainder of 2019 and 2020 above 90% in terms of calls answered. Satisfaction levels also increased from 56.6% pre transfer (April 2019) to 67% in July 2020. This has been achieved with fewer staff (41fte vs 33fte) assisted by an improved recruitment position and retention of staff. Resolution Champions have been introduced to deal with tenants' escalations.

2.4.3 **Housing Repairs** saw 2,972 complaints in the 12 months leading up to 31 March 2019. When considered in the context of 242,205 repairs completed in 12 months, those that were justified and partially justified accounted for 0.9% of the repairs carried out. The common causes for complaints were:

- Timescales and delays
- Efficiency of service/ failure to deliver service
- Complaints about policy and/ or procedures
- Service failure
- Poor communication
- Quality/ standard of work carried out.

2.4.4 The contact centre handles calls for this service and received 388,620 telephone calls regarding Housing Repairs in 2018. A large number of these were repeat calls. A proportion of repeat calls is inevitable in a reactive service such as this, and there will be peaks (for example in bad weather). However, the percentage is higher than the national average and work is underway to understand why people are making repeat calls (is it around expectations, standards, behaviours?), involving all services (housing, Customer Services and contractors).

2.4.5 The main issue for this service area was the need for capital investment in the housing stock. For example, leaks are one of the top reasons for calls and so investment in kitchens and bathrooms is a priority. Variations in contractor performance was also a factor.

2.4.6 Resolution Champions were introduced in 2016 and onsite contractor planners are co-located at the contact centre to support escalations.

2.4.7 The onset of the pandemic has not presented any major increase in complaints. As Government has lifted restrictions regarding COVID 19, the service has started to release and complete routine repairs in customers' homes, maintaining social distancing and safe working practices. Contract works officers have returned to business as usual where possible and the following areas are being targeted: disrepair and litigation, void inspections, mutual exchanges, complaints and customer service visits.

2.4.8 The contact centre received 160,811 telephone calls last year relating to **Housing Options**, made up of the following three areas:

- Housing Options



- Homelessness
- Temporary Accommodation

- 2.4.9 The service was facing a significant backlog at the time of the evidence gathering. As of the 21st October 2019 there were 11,725 housing applications awaiting assessment. The assessment time for an application has now reached 27 weeks in comparison to the agreed six-week target. The latest figures (first week in October 2020) showed that there were 16,085 people on the housing register. An average of 400 new applications are received each week and an average of 570 per week are being assessed (or returned to the applicant). Additional officers have been temporarily appointed to reduce the number of assessments outstanding and the waiting time for completion.
- 2.4.10 The main issue for this service area was the shortage of properties, with around 415 to 420 new applications a week, and around 50 properties becoming available each week.
- 2.4.11 The Housing Options service is undergoing a review⁴, recognising that there needs to be more of a focus on prevention – looking at the process to encourage people to come forward before they reach crisis point. The application process also needs to be looked at as people can be locked into properties they have placed bids upon; and there also needs to be provision for people to advocate for more vulnerable applicants.
- 2.4.12 Currently, the Housing Options Centre remains closed to walk in due to Covid-19. The number of people coming through the Housing Options Centre via phone remains steady at around 220-240 per week and around the same as before lockdown.

2.5 Highways

- 2.5.1 Since 2014, the City Council had been in legal dispute with Amey, the main contractor for the Highways service via a Private Finance Initiative (PFI). This had a significant, negative, effect on the service, resulting in a backlog of maintenance which has in turn had a significant effect on complaints and calls. A commercial settlement was reached in June 2019, which included Kier Highways taking over as the sub-contractor that would carry out the maintenance and repair works. This position is expected to continue until at least June 2021, which is the deadline specified for restructuring the project into a replacement long-term PFI contract.
- 2.5.2 A small number of programmed maintenance schemes were commenced towards the end of 2019 and in early 2020. This was the first programmed maintenance on surfacing that had been undertaken since the Autumn of 2017. These schemes were focused on roads and footways that were in particularly poor condition and had been subject to significant numbers of complaints. Work is also underway to look at pavement management and re-surfacing. However, the level of

⁴ Further detail is available in a [report](#) to the Housing and Neighbourhoods O&S Committee on 27th February 2020



investment in this interim period will not complete the level of investment that the council expected under the PFI contract.⁵

- 2.5.3 The impact of this on calls and complaints to the service can be seen in the volumes of calls. In 2018 the contact centre received just under 31,600 telephone calls in relation to the Highways service. At the time of the evidence gathering, the backlog included 30,000 defects and also around 700 dropped kerbs.
- 2.5.4 Resolution Champions were introduced to the Highways service in 2016. The issues they deal with most often are:
- Pavement and road defects;
 - Drainage and flooding on the highway;
 - Highways tree pruning;
 - Disabled bay markings.
- 2.5.5 These are reflected in the issues most often escalated to Ward Councillors, with the addition of road obstructions.
- 2.5.6 Members were keen that lessons were learned from the experience with Amey in terms of customer services. Calls on dropped kerbs, street lighting and access to properties were transferred to the contact centre following concerns about the quality of service received. It was confirmed that customer services interactions could be brought back in-house without affecting the PFI credit, and this should be seriously considered when looking at the long-term contract.

⁵ Further detail is available in a [report](#) to the Sustainability and Transport O&S Committee on 8th July 2020



3 Conclusions and Recommendations

3.1 Main Themes

3.1.1 Though each of the service areas considered had different underlying issues driving complaints, the Committee's investigation revealed clear themes that have implications across all council services. These can be summarised as:

- **A Common City Council Approach:** there is no Council-wide approach to dealing with customers and complaints leading to inconsistent responses, variable recording and poor understanding of the standards expected. A standardised, council-wide approach is needed to eliminate this. And whilst there is a need for some consolidation, there is a need to retain the ability of customers to access services by different routes – the “right channel for the right customer at the right time”. Transparency is also important here – data on customer interactions is not readily available so performance levels are not clear.
- **A Focus on Resolution and Eliminating Repeat Occurrences:** issues not only need to be resolved “end to end” *but also* steps should be taken to ensure those issues are not repeated. The process should include provision for the escalation of matters to senior managers where there are areas of persistent failure.
- **Using What Customers Tell Us to Shape Policy and Investment:** Customer contacts and complaints are not prominent in performance reporting; customer service issues do not feature in investment decisions; and there is no clear council-wide process/strategy to learn from complaints.

3.1.2 Each of these points are discussed in more detail below.

3.2 A Council-Wide Approach

3.2.1 We found that the approach to dealing with customer enquiries and complaints varies across the organisation and, whilst there is a customer service standard on the website, not all departments adhere to this. Members and citizens receive varying levels of service and the culture of responding to enquiries across many parts of the organisation (with notable exceptions) is poor. The external review of complaints and Member enquiry handling supported this finding, noting a lack of focus on the citizen with no consistent approach, a lot of complaints going unrecorded and the volumes included in reporting not reflecting the true volumes.

3.2.2 There are different routes into the Council, and it is not always clear who the customer should be contacting. It should not be for citizens to navigate the complexities of council departments. There should be similar standards and communications clearly set out. The difference between an enquiry and a complaint should also be clear, alongside the route for dealing with each.



- 3.2.3 We heard in our evidence gathering that when services moved to the contact centre, efficiency and satisfaction increased. Such a move may not be appropriate for all services, but directorates should be open to the help and expertise on offer from the Customer Services team. We heard that whilst some service areas did take advantage of this, others have been resistant. The focus here should be the customer, and unfortunately there are still some examples of service areas putting staff preferences over customer requirements. There should be a review of all telephone and on-line access across the council to understand the customer experience and how it can be improved, starting with those areas with the highest call volumes.
- 3.2.4 There should of course be room for different service standards where that is appropriate, and to take account of different types of enquiry, but the response times should be clear, the communication consistent and information shared as appropriate to reduce the need for citizens to provide the same information more than once. There should be a consistent platform for telephone and on-line engagement, and performance measures standardised across the Council.
- 3.2.5 Accessibility is critical. Whilst the current number and variety of ways to contact the council would benefit from some consolidation, we are clear that this is not about moving all interactions on-line but encouraging people to use the right channel for that enquiry. Encouraging those who can to use on-line/self-help channels frees up other channels for those who really need it, and so whilst working to increase digital inclusion is important, this does not mean switching off other options.
- 3.2.6 There were examples of a lack of compliance and resistance in some service areas to using customer data to improve the day to day operation of services. There are cultural changes that are needed to ensure that customers are a driver of improvement and should form part of performance management and inform management appraisals. There should be consequences where there is avoidable poor performance.
- 3.2.7 There should also be greater transparency on customer data so that Members and citizens can see how each service area is performing, and how that data is being used in service improvement.
- 3.2.8 To support this work and promote greater transparency, the measure of customer satisfaction should be reviewed. As noted earlier, customer “satisfaction” is being reported as a combination of the “good” and “average” scores. People who report that their experience is “average” are not satisfied and therefore should not be included in this measure, or an alternative measure should be used. Members would also like to see a standard best practice measure, perhaps through working with the LGA, to enable benchmarking across Councils.



Recommendations

Ref	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R01	That a Council-wide approach and vision for customer services is agreed and owned by all directorates. This should include an explanation of the consequences of failure to meet the performance standards set out in the approach.	Deputy Leader	May 2021
R02	That a review of all telephone and on-line access is undertaken across the council to understand the customer experience and how it can be improved. This should lead to a consistent platform for telephone and on-line engagement, and standardised performance measures across the Council.	Deputy Leader	May 2021
R03	b) That each customer-facing service area publishes customer data on a regular basis, alongside other performance information, so citizens and Members can see the "end to end" performance. c) Directorates should be able to demonstrate how this information is used in service improvement.	Deputy Leader	May 2021
R04	That the measure of customer satisfaction is reviewed, to either reflect those who report a "good" experience, or an alternative measure used. Officers should also explore working with the LGA to agree a standard measure of customer satisfaction to allow proper benchmarking across Councils.	Deputy Leader	May 2021
R05	Whilst many employees do a good job in helping residents, Directorates should be supported in making the necessary changes to tackle residual culture and behaviour that does not put the customer first. As there was evidence of this in waste management, the delayed management restructure should be completed urgently.	Deputy Leader Cabinet Member, Street Scene and Parks	May 2021

3.3 Resolution and Eliminating Repeat Occurrences

3.3.1 Members reported two main issues in relation to the resolution of enquiries and complaints. Firstly, there is the issue of some matters not being resolved when reported and members and customers



having to chase up for a response. This in turn leads to multiple reports, increasing the enquiries and complaints to be followed up. The experience of members during the aftermath of the waste collectors' strike was exactly that – that they were constantly reporting repeat issues into the service area – and it is still happening in some areas.

- 3.3.2 Another of the recurring themes of the evidence gathering was that whilst individual matters were eventually resolved (e.g. the report of a missed waste collection resulted in that waste being collected), there were many occasions where the same problem kept occurring (e.g. waste collections being missed in the same streets each week), and that explanations for the problem were not forthcoming.
- 3.3.3 Both issues highlighted the need for a system of escalation – so that the matters that are not being resolved satisfactorily are picked up and actioned routinely. This process should include root cause analysis of what is going wrong and result in management action to rectify the situation. This requires a customer focused, problem solving approach in all service areas and should include clear and comprehensive messages back to Councillors.
- 3.3.4 This “end to end” approach would both solve the problem long term and reduce the number of contacts the Council receives.
- 3.3.5 This escalation process should not only be for those services within the contact centre. Where a service area is seeing repeated failures, the Customer Services team should be able to assist that service area to improve its provision to its customers.

Information Sharing

- 3.3.6 Other ways to reduce unnecessary contact include timely and comprehensive responses to both customers and Members; and having up to date information available on the website. Getting the right information to citizens in a timely manner not only reduces avoidable complaints or requests, it would also contribute to increased satisfaction. Members identified a number of instances where the Council could improve how it communicates with residents and local Councillors. For example, where there are significant disruptions to waste collection rounds, the rounds that will not take place that day could be published on the website, or at least shared with local Councillors, along with an estimated time as to when that collection will take place. During one evidence gathering session we learned that the Assistant Director of Waste receives a record at the end of each day of the specific roads / properties where collections have been missed. Depots should send this to all Ward Councillors at the end of the day as a matter of routine to enable them to advise residents accordingly. Similarly, with regards to Highways; information on maintenance schedules (including when reported problems will be addressed) should be regularly shared with local Members.

Councillor Enquiries and Complaints

- 3.3.7 On the whole, Members were encouraged by the operation and responses of the Councillor enquiry service and felt that this had improved greatly in recent years. However, many Councillors still



experience significant issues, and are obliged to escalate cases where they have not received a satisfactory, or any, reply.

- 3.3.8 Those issues partly relate to variations in service areas – whilst there are notable exceptions, Councillors have experienced numerous failed or unsatisfactory responses to enquiries. Members are also unhappy with the quality of response – the level of detail and clarity. In particular, members complained that when they asked for an explanation as to why an issue had occurred, that was often not given. Furthermore, accepting that the enquiry service is dependent on getting the intelligence and response from the service area, it was felt that more could be done to chase overdue replies.
- 3.3.9 With further improvements, more Councillors should be persuaded to use this, certainly for simpler service enquiries. It was also suggested that Councillors receive reports from the contact centre about the enquiries/ complaints in their ward to give data on what citizens are raising with the Council.
- 3.3.10 It is also helpful to distinguish between types of enquiries and complaint. Some enquiries are simple service requests that can be responded to simply and quickly. However, some cannot be answered immediately, and will need to be referred to officers in the relevant service area, for example policy or strategic questions. For these types of questions, there was a definite preference amongst Councillors to go direct to the relevant senior officer.
- 3.3.11 Further refinement of the enquiry handling approach should therefore be considered to take account of the difference in response (and time it would take) to ensure a quality and timely response to Members.
- 3.3.12 There was also a wider point about the data that local councillors receive to inform their decision-making. Data on performance in some services would be useful at a local level to be shared with local Councillors. For example, data on housing repairs used to be shared with District Committees and scrutinised by local members. This no longer happens and alternative mechanisms for sharing such data should be established to help Members carry out their ward role effectively.



Recommendations

Ref	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R06	<p>That an escalation mechanism is built into the revised approach to enquiries and complaints across <u>all</u> council service areas, to include root cause analysis of problems and complaints, with clear management action taken to rectify them.</p> <p>This should include reporting back to members as to the progress of enquiries, so they are not obliged to chase for responses.</p>	Deputy Leader	May 2021
R07	<p>That information sharing with Members is improved to enable them to answer queries from residents, particularly with regards to waste and highways.</p> <p>In the case of missed waste collections, Ward Councillors should be sent the list collated by the depots at the end of the day of missed roads/ properties to enable them to advise residents accordingly.</p> <p>Members should also receive reports from the contact centre about the enquiries/ complaints in their ward to give visibility on what citizens are raising with the Council.</p>	Deputy Leader Cabinet Member, Street Scene and Parks	May 2021
R08	<p>That each service area reviews what information could be shared on the website in a more timely manner, to assist in reducing calls and complaints to the contact centre.</p>	Deputy Leader	May 2021

3.4 Using What Customers Tell Us to Shape Policy and Investment Decisions

- 3.4.1 There needs to be much greater transparency about service performance in relation to customer services matters and the resolution of complaints. This not only allows citizens and Members to hold services to account but would also shape policy and investment decisions. There is currently no council wide process/strategy to learn from complaints and performance monitoring does not currently reflect customer contacts.
- 3.4.2 Policy and investment should follow performance and customer evidence should be used to support decision making and drive improvements. This is not currently happening. In two of the service areas we looked at, historic under-investment was one of the drivers of customer dissatisfaction.



For example, a repeated cause of missed waste collections was breakdowns of collection vehicles. Yet the decision to replace the fleet – now long overdue – was repeatedly delayed.

- 3.4.3 Each decision made should consider the impact on citizen experience and how that will be improved.
- 3.4.4 Citizen engagement in how we design our services and respond to customers is one way to reduce complaints and unnecessary contacts, as well as ensuring we are serving our citizens well. There is some good work in this area – such as in Adult Social Care – and this is an area that the Co-ordinating O&S Committee will return to.

Recommendations

Ref	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R09	That Cabinet and senior leadership must ensure that customer data is used in performance monitoring and to drive policy and investment decisions. A report should be brought to this Committee, setting out how this will be achieved, including a mechanism for ensuring each decision considers the impact on citizen experience.	Deputy Leader	March 2021

3.5 Member Protocol

- 3.5.1 The Co-ordinating O&S Committee considered the content of a member protocol at their meeting on 8th November 2019 but waited to make firm recommendations on the matter subject to the outcome of the Complaints, Compliments and Members Enquiries Process Review being undertaken by the Customer services team.
- 3.5.2 The findings of this review were reported to Co-ordinating on 3rd July 2020 and included recognition of the lack of a clear, consistent process for Members of the Council/MPs to follow. The preferred approach set out in that report is to have a central team to govern the system and compliments, complaints and Member Enquiries process with standardised complaints teams embedded within each Directorate. There would be defined routes for each Directorate for Citizens and Members to submit complaints and enquiries (see section 2.2).
- 3.5.3 Members of the Committee, in their deliberations, considered that there were many good arguments for directing enquiries through the BCC enquiries (the current central system for member enquiries), but members will continue to go direct to officers, particularly if they know that going to a particular officer will resolve the issue much more quickly (the Revenues and Benefits service was commended for its swift and comprehensive responses). Members do not believe that there should be a direction for all members to use BCC enquiries (or similar system), but that as the system became more successful, more Members would be encouraged to use it.



- 3.5.4 Members also agreed that there should be a set timescale for responses to member queries though that should depend on the nature of enquiries, with longer timescales for more complex ones. There should be conformity across directorates with a more robust escalation process. It may help to distinguish requests for a service and requests for investigation, for example where an alley way has not been cleaned and ownership/responsibility is disputed. This is a systemic flaw that needs investigation and resolution. Having clear avenues for members depending on the type of enquiry will be critical.
- 3.5.5 With regards to responses, there should be an acknowledgement that the enquiry has been received (some officers are very poor at that) though the real interest is in the resolution of the problem and a higher standard in getting matters resolved. Responses should contain an explanation as to why something went wrong; and be clear and consistent, with the quality of responses checked.
- 3.5.6 Overall, the protocol should be short and not overly prescriptive, but it should explicitly identify where service areas have different standards.
- 3.5.7 The Committee therefore supports the preferred option set out by the Deputy Leader and officers on the 3rd July, subject to the caveats set out above, and asks that the draft protocol is brought to this Committee for comment, ahead of its being finalised.

Ref	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R10	<p>That the preferred option for Member enquiries is pursued, subject to the findings set out above; and that a draft of the protocol is brought to the committee for comment and review before it is agreed.</p> <p>Within that, there should be a clear set of options for Members dependent on the type of enquiry.</p>	Deputy Leader	[to be advised by Wendy/Peter]

3.6 Progress against Implementation and Motion

- 3.6.1 The Co-ordinating O&S Committee will retain a keen interest in the on-going development of this work and will have regular updates on the Committee's agenda. Members will work with the Deputy Leader and officers to identify any further opportunities for scrutiny work to support the on-going process. Customer services will remain a regular item on Co-ordinating O&S committee agendas so that members can closely monitor progress in this area.
- 3.6.2 To keep the Committee informed of progress in implementing the recommendations within this report, the Executive is recommended to report back on progress periodically.



Ref	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R11	<p>Progress towards achievement of these recommendations should be reported to the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee no later than March 2021. Subsequent progress reports will be scheduled by the Committee thereafter, until all recommendations are implemented.</p> <p>In addition, the Co-ordinating O&S Committee will have regular monitoring reports on customer services matters beyond the tracking of this report.</p>	Deputy Leader of the Council	March 2021



Appendix 1: Customer Satisfaction

How would you rate your overall experience when you contacted the council – Last 12 months

Customer Satisfaction							
Mth-Yr	Good		Average		Poor		Total Responses
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Jul-19	440	49.5%	150	16.9%	298	33.6%	888
Aug-19	253	45.3%	94	16.8%	211	37.8%	558
Sep-19	360	43.5%	158	19.1%	310	37.4%	828
Oct-19	319	43.0%	129	17.4%	293	39.5%	741
Nov-19	285	47.7%	95	15.9%	218	36.5%	598
Dec-19	204	43.8%	72	15.5%	190	40.8%	466
Jan-20	272	45.0%	107	17.7%	226	37.4%	605
Feb-20	194	48.6%	66	16.5%	139	34.8%	399
Mar-20	539	50.4%	203	19.0%	327	30.6%	1069
Apr-20	376	59.9%	96	15.3%	156	24.8%	628
May-20	264	53.5%	86	17.4%	143	29.0%	493
Jun-20	517	53.8%	164	17.1%	280	29.1%	961

Overall Agent Willingness to Help – Last 12 months

Agent Willingness					
Mth-Yr	Willing	Did What They Could	Unwilling	Total Responses	% Agent Willingness
Jul-19	423	248	149	820	82%
Aug-19	244	141	113	498	77%
Sep-19	354	218	174	746	77%
Oct-19	314	192	159	665	76%
Nov-19	278	136	116	530	78%
Dec-19	195	113	103	411	75%
Jan-20	266	163	113	542	79%
Feb-20	191	93	83	367	77%
Mar-20	478	246	203	927	78%
Apr-20	347	149	74	570	87%
May-20	240	119	87	446	80%
Jun-20	484	221	176	881	80%



Overall satisfaction by service – June 2020

Service	Customer Satisfaction - June 20						
	Good		Average		Poor		Total Responses
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Benefits	48	57.1%	12	14.3%	24	28.6%	84
Elections	2	100.0%		0.0%		0.0%	2
Environmental Health	11	45.8%	6	25.0%	7	29.2%	24
Highways	12	50.0%	4	16.7%	8	33.3%	24
Housing Options	54	42.2%	26	20.3%	48	37.5%	128
Housing Rents	33	68.8%	10	20.8%	5	10.4%	48
Housing Repairs	129	57.6%	31	13.8%	64	28.6%	224
Neighbourhood Offices	11	55.0%	5	25.0%	4	20.0%	20
Parking	4	50.0%		0.0%	4	50.0%	8
Parks	5	38.5%	2	15.4%	6	46.2%	13
Planning	8	50.0%	4	25.0%	4	25.0%	16
Revenues	125	59.2%	39	18.5%	47	22.3%	211
Tenancy and Estate Management	34	51.5%	10	15.2%	22	33.3%	66
Waste Management	41	44.1%	15	16.1%	37	39.8%	93
Grand Total	517	53.8%	164	17.1%	280	29.1%	961



Appendix 2: Escalation Process (Waste)

Resolution Champion process for dealing with Member escalation regarding Waste

Ref	Activity Name	Designated Role	Activity Details
1.1	Councillor sends email enquiry to Councillor Enquiry Mailbox.	Councillor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Councillors are provided with a dedicated inbox for Cllr Enquiries - The Councillor email address is BCCCouncilorsEnquiry@birmingham.gov.uk
1.2	Resolution Champion opens email.	Resolution Champion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resolution Champion opens the enquiry to establish the nature of the enquiry. - Before proceeding with logging an enquiry, the Resolution Champion would interrogate the following systems to establish if the enquiry has been logged and if so at what stage it is at and with which officer / depot: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check CRM / CXM Post September 2019 • MAPPS • I- casework • Dropped work spreadsheets from the depots
1.3	Enquiry is already logged	Resolution Champion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resolution champion will liaise with relevant depot Assistant Service Manager (ASM) or Service Manager (SM) asking for a progress update on outstanding request. - Resolution Champion will send an acknowledgement to the member confirming actions taken. - Enquiry is closed
1.4	New Enquiry	Resolution Champions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resolution champion will log the enquiry on the relevant systems - Resolution champion will send the details of the enquiry to the relevant depot Assistant Service Manager (ASM) or Service Manager (SM) providing relevant reference number. - Resolution Champion will send confirmation to member confirming their request has been logged and passed to the depot management for action. - Enquiry is closed
1.5	Repeat failure - previously reported	Resolution Champions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resolution champion will locate previous reference numbers - Resolution champion will escalate to the senior service managers asking for an urgent response - Resolution champion will update member with all actions taken - Resolution champion will regularly continue to monitor this enquiry
1.6	Repeat failure not previously reported	Resolution Champions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resolution champion will log request - Resolution champion will check dropped work spreadsheets - Resolution champion will escalate to service manager, providing details from the enquiry and dropped work whilst requesting an urgent response - Resolution champion will continue to monitor this enquiry
1.7	Escalation to principal service manager	Resolution Champions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resolution champion will escalate, providing details of previous failures to Principal Service Manager - Resolution champion will continue to monitor this enquiry