

Birmingham City Council

Coordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee

23 September 2022



Subject: Customer Service Programme and Complaints Update

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Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? ☐ Yes ☒ No

If relevant, state which appendix is exempt, and provide exempt information paragraph number or reason if confidential: N/A

1. Purpose and Attached Documents

1.1. This report provides an update to the Coordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the Customer Service Programme that was launched in January 2022 and the Council's Complaints process that was launched in April 2021 following an independent review.

1.2. The report will provide background and updates on both areas and seek views on the priority areas for the further development of the Customer Service Programme.

2. A History of Customer Service and Contact

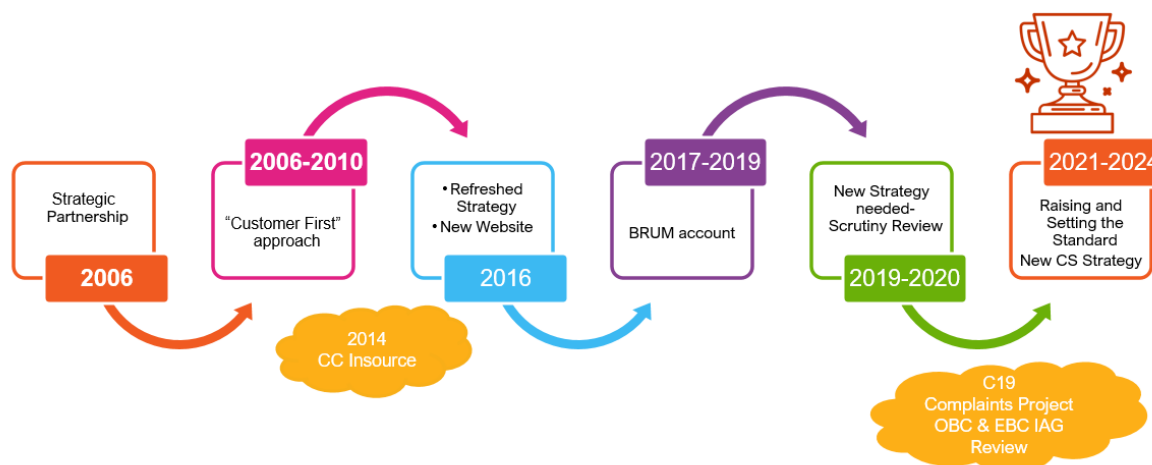


Figure 1 - A history of Customer contact at Birmingham City Council

2.1. One of the lessons from the previous “Customer First” approach was a lack of organisational leadership and buy-in from all parts of the Council. This led to a very inconsistent customer experience, which was made worse during the pandemic when online access was often the only choice citizens had. In March 2021, the Council commissioned a review of the services we provide to our citizens; and to provide insights on how we can improve. The review confirmed our suspicions:

- We do not provide consistently high-quality customer service across the board.
- In places, our customer service offer is both quite traditional and inadequate.
- Gaps found in our level of customer care and a significant number of areas where we must improve.

This strengthened our resolve and provided us with essential guidance on where we needed to start.

3. Customer Service Programme Update

3.1. In December 2021, following the in-depth review referred to in Section 2.1 above, the programme received Cabinet approval to implement the [Customer Service Strategy](#) and to embed change and improvement in how the Council delivers its services to citizens through all access channels. This approval was for an initial 12 months with a £ 1.69m budget allocation, initially focussing on ‘Fixing the Basics’ as outlined in the Strategy commitments (see *Appendix A*). The programme undertook analysis of existing BCC data sources (i.e. Online Brum; Corporate Contact Centre, CSAT and Online Fire & Send forms (i.e. online forms with no integration into line of business systems or workflow) to identify the services our customers engage with most frequently. The analysis highlighted high volume services such as:

- Housing (repairs, applications and ASB)
- Waste (garden waste renewal, replacement and missed bins)
- Highways (repairs, fly tipping, report pavements)
- Revenues & Benefits (benefit entitlements)
- Education & Skills (school admissions, child bus pass)
- Bereavement Services (register a death)

3.2. The principles of our Digital Strategy were instrumental to informing the approach of the Customer Service Programme, and in adopting this new way of working, the agile methodology ensures the programme is human-centred and conducts the user research required to provide the evidence base to ensure service design

meets customer needs – putting our customers at the heart of everything we do. This objective is being realised as illustrated in the achievements to date in section 5.

3.3. Our Customer Service Strategy makes the following commitments to our customers which underpins the goal of the customer service programme and aims to make it easier for customers to get to the services they need, by;

- using technology to make our services better for our customers
- making it easier for our customers to talk to us
- listening to what our customers have to say
- making it easier for customers to access the information they need online
- training our staff better to help our customers
- becoming more connected so we can respond faster
- working with our customers to build the services they want and need
- building better relationships with the people of Birmingham.

The ambition was split into three levels: Fix the basics, Raise the standard and set the standard with each level having a set of commitments to deliver. The full list of commitments is available in Appendix A.

3.4. To understand the current customer experience for high demand services, the programme conducted an initial discovery phase focused on Waste Management, Housing Repairs, Bereavement Services and Highways. Through user research and data analysis the programme sought to understand the current customer and staff experience, including pain points and user needs, in order to identify a model customer experience, based on best practice that will increase/improve satisfaction.

3.5. Based on evidence from the research, a high-level common 'gold standard' customer experience was developed that is intended to be broadly applicable to any service area; and provide the north star underpinning the activity of the Customer Service programme.

'Gold standard' customer experience

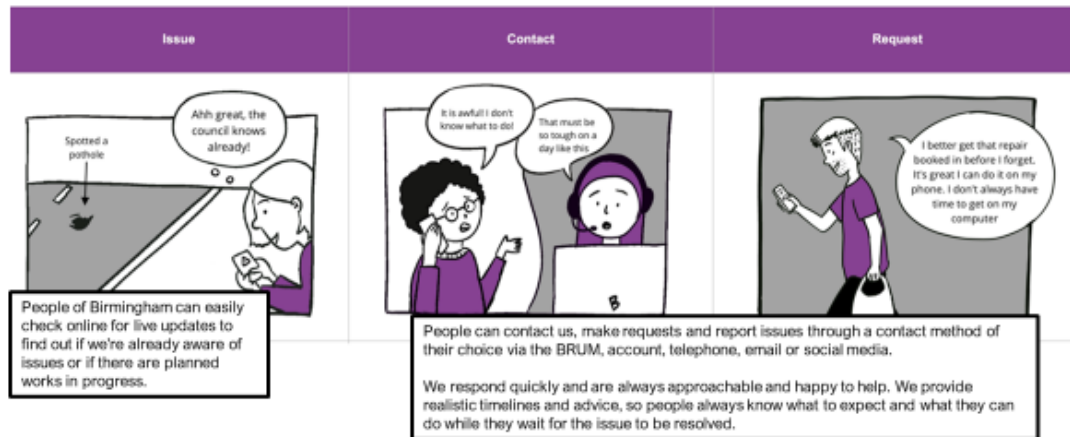


Figure 2 – Visual bringing to life the target 'gold standard' customer experience

3.6. In addition to the development of the 'gold standard', findings from the research provided the following insights:

About our customers:

- People are proud of Birmingham
- There are mixed views of the council
- Trust in the council (and Government as a whole) is low
- There is an awareness that the council is stretched
- There is some discontent around political and contractual structures within the council

Research themes:

- Most people commented on a lack of **communication** when interacting with council services
- Decisions aren't made **transparently**, there is a lack of understanding about why things happen
- There is an expectation that the council should be **proactive** – some things shouldn't need customer interaction
- People should be treated **empathetically**

What **good** customer service looks like:

- People don't need to submit a formal complaint when things go wrong
- People want the council to be held to account but won't always take action to do so
- Examples of good customer service include being kept informed, being treated with empathy and ease of use
- A general belief that the council can achieve 'good customer service' but expectations are low

- Customers expect the council to make improvements around training and culture

4. Outputs

4.1. Playbacks to the services covered over 50 recommendations (*Appendix B*) that the programme and service areas needed to consider and prioritise, each detailing the insight (with supporting storyboards, personas, user journeys and user stories) and a recommendation. Three key themes:

- **Communication:** with customers, within services and between services
- **Complaints and feedback:** asking at the right time, making it easy to give feedback and action being taken by the service as a result
- **Use of digital (data insight and customer journey) and technology (systems, processes, online capability):** we need to address the paper based, manual processes and maximise what is already available

4.2. The insights detailed in paragraph 3.6 of this report will inform the next phase of work with the service areas:

- **Culture Change:** To embed the principles of Our Customer Charter through active conversations with staff to ensure all 11,000 employees provide a basic level of customer care – putting people first all the time, every time.
- **Web Content Review:** To ensure customers access the right information at the right time and content is accurate and update. Meeting the standards outlined in the new content governance strategy.
- **Bereavement Services:** To provide clear, accessible guidance (end to end) to help people understand how to lay a loved one to rest in Birmingham.
- **Waste:** Investigate how we can enable proactive digital communication between the Waste service and residential customers e.g. against missed, assisted collections and garden waste.
- **Housing:** To develop a common understanding of the current end to end journey of a housing tenant. Agree options to proto-type and test with users using evidence-based user needs.
- **Customer Panel:** Giving our customers a voice - to take an active role in shaping the services we deliver to make sure we continually meet people's needs.

4.3. Inflight workstreams and the growing product backlog (pipeline) present opportunities for BCC to achieve outcomes such as:

- Improved customer service across a range of priority service areas

- A method/internal capability for delivering ongoing service improvements
- Improved reputation for the Council and reduction in complaints
- Reduction in costs as failure demand is tackled
- Cultural change and the embedding of agile practice through delivery

4.4. Organisationally the programme is part of the Fit for Purpose Council (see Figure 3), one of the three strategic portfolios of work that form part of the Birmingham City Councils Delivery Plan.

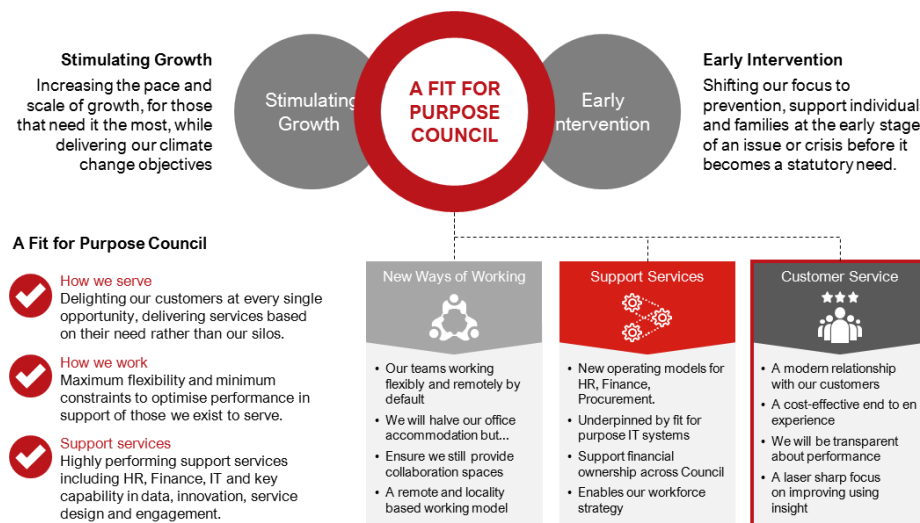


Figure 3 – Fit for Purpose Council Portfolio (Note: the locality based working model is being worked on via the Early Intervention & Prevention Programme)

Figure 3 above provides a high-level summary of how the programme relates to our parent portfolio and other strategic transformation initiatives across the council. The Fit for Purpose Council Portfolio has the following objectives:

- Improve the experience our customers receive when contacting the Council (effectiveness).
- Ensure we have the performance data to understand customer interactions and continually improve (efficiency and economy).
- Fund the improvements in the customer and business processes in a range of services (economy, efficiency, and effectiveness)
- Reduce the number of contact points and interactions customers need to navigate when contacting the council (efficiency)
- Train and empower staff to put customers at the heart of everything we do (effectiveness)
- Provide the Council with financial savings (economy)
- Ensure there is a continuous cycle of customer improvements in the future.

5. Achievements to date

- Launch of [Our Customer Service Strategy](#) (inc [easy reads](#))

- First iteration of the [Our Customer Charter](#)
- Brum Account:
 - Skip Licencing (automated advanced payments) and Mapping solution
 - Highways Licensing (automated advanced payments, view/track updates)
 - Highways Dropped Kerbs (process automation, advanced payments, view/track status updates)
 - Fly Tipping (customer location map enables customers to pinpoint areas of fly tipping for accurate reporting)
 - Benefits online (view benefit awards and payment schedules)
- 166 pdf forms and out of date documents removed as part of the web content review
- Web Content Strategy and Governance developed
- Web Content Audits completed for Highways (143 pages); Housing (380 pages); Waste (178 pages) and Bereavement (94 pages)
- Content creation and improvements via www.birmingham.gov.uk implemented for:
 - [Bereavement Services](#) inc [Arranging burial or scattering of ashes](#), [pre-registering a death](#)
 - Waste [HRCs appointments](#), [Report missed bin or sack collection](#)
 - Elections and Voting [Annual Canvas](#)
- Contact Centre: Planning to migrate customer contact for Bereavement Services by the end of 2022. Home to School Transport customer contact was transferred into the Contact centre August 2022, providing better more resilient customer experience through single contact numbers.
- Customer Panel: There is a pool of 2500 citizens who have been engaged as part of the customer research. Citizens were invited to participate in research for their preferred service of interest. A customer panel has also been formed and a citizen has been appointed as the Chair with a team of core members including reserves recruited, profiled against 2022 Census data
- Culture Change – phase 1 customer standards workshops piloted with Adult Social Care and Digital & Customer Services Directorates to embed principles of our customer charter. These workshops are now in the process of being rolled out to all Directorates.
- Examples of how complaints data is being used to improve the customer experience are detailed in section 9 of this report.

6. Customer Service Programme – beyond January 2023

- 6.1. Adopting an agile methodology and human-centred delivery approach is still new to BCC, however the programme is adapting well, to build organisational capability and experience as well as helping us to embed the approach, so that continuous improvement to customer service becomes second nature.
- 6.2. The Customer Service Strategy vision takes us beyond the ‘Fix the Basics’ of the programme’s first year, with ambitions to ‘Raise the Standard’ from Year 2 onwards, with a maturity roadmap to ‘Set the Standard’ and become a best-in-class exemplar for customer experiences. The programme’s growing backlog of work builds on the scope of the Strategy commitments, to now also contain

features uncovered during the further user research; as well as service area 'asks' to support service improvements to enhance the customer journey

6.3. However, the programme only has commitment for an initial 12-month delivery plan and is consulting to continue the Customer Service Programme with a view to securing the funding required for forthcoming years (January to December 2023-2025) and ensure we address the commitments outlined in the Customer Service Strategy. The ability to continue to deliver value to the service areas and work at pace requires a resource profile consisting of a multi-disciplinary delivery team with capability to work across multiple workstreams.

6.4. The scope for 2023/25 is based on the active reviews being undertaken by the service leads; the programme backlog; and as the programme continues to build momentum, the number of services requesting support. This has informed the high-level view of sequencing for services potentially in scope (Please refer to Appendix C: Proposed programme roadmap); and the programme is seeking to validate these as the correct services to prioritise for development:

- Highways
- Waste Services
- Housing Management
- Bereavement Services
- Children's & Families
- Adults & Social Care
- Contact Centre onboarding a broader range of services
- Web Content Review

Taking these service areas through the roadmap outlined in Appendix C will achieve the overall aim of delivering a best-in-class relationship with customers offering an improved, consistent, and cost-effective end-to-end experience when they access services, information, or advice from the Council.

7. Recommendations for Coordinating Overview and Scrutiny to consider for the Customer Service Programme

- It would be useful for the Committee to give their view of priorities and focus areas for the delivery plan for the programme for subsequent years. This can then be built into a firm delivery plan building upon the outline shown in Appendix C.

8. Complaints Update

8.1. Following on from the Overview & Scrutiny report recommendations in 2019, there were 11 recommendations to be implemented of which 4 were specific to the complaint's activity. These were as follows;

Recommendation	Progress
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.	The current contract for the Customer Satisfaction system is at capacity and no new services can be added without making the contract non compliant. The Customer Service programme will be rolling out the new Customer Satisfaction capability procured as part of the wider Contact Centre telephony procurement which is scheduled to be completed by the end of May 2022. Following the implementation a corporate roll out will commence. CSAT for complaints is within the compliance levels and therefore is due to be launched in October 2021. Reporting on root causes and learning for complaints to be launched for Quarter 2.
R06 - That an escalation mechanism is built into the revised approach to enquiries and complaints across all council service areas, to include root cause analysis of problems and complaints, with clear management action taken to rectify them. This should include reporting back to members as to the progress of enquiries , so they are not obliged to chase for responses	Clear escalation routes have been identified for each service area. Clear definitions for enquiries and complaints. Root cause analysis identified for Quarter 2 reporting with a mechanism to report findings to relevant stakeholders for moving forward into improvement projects. Further reporting developed weekly to identify cases that require updates for teams to ensure consistent action.
R07 - 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.	Casework reports have been drafted along with ward enquiry and complaint volume and root cause data. These will be implemented for Quarter 2 reporting (End October 2021)
R10 - 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. Within that, there should be a clear set of options for Members dependent on the type of enquiry	Members protocol was drafted, presented to the committee April 13 th 2021, agreed to be progressed by officers and implemented on May 24 th 2021 The protocol give 4 options for contact and include service level agreements for enquiries complaints, emergencies and escalation.

It was agreed that an in-depth review of complaints would be commissioned in 2019.

The findings of the review are summarised as;

- The number of complaints received per Citizen was showing ten times higher when compared to other authorities of a similar size (1.2 per thousand), although accurate measurement of how many customer complaints was noted.
- Customer satisfaction (BCC: 68%) was lower than the average across the whole public sector (73.9%)
- No clear process for Citizens and Members to follow
- No Members Protocol or process for vexatious complaints
- No clear definitions of a complaint or enquiry
- Processes differed across each directorate
- Citizens had seven different channels to use to complain and there were at least three different systems in use to record and track complaints, therefore a lot of confusion and lack of consistency in reporting
- Complaints were going unrecorded with volumes included in reporting not reflecting the true much higher volumes
- Service failings that because complaints were not resolved, creating complaints that could have been avoided
- No one set of reporting to highlight to service areas the failures occurring and more importantly allowing informative decision making to ensure action is taken to stop repeat failure

8.2. The Council's Leadership team recognised the current complaints system was not fit for purpose and agreed to invest £1.2 million in additional resources over

2yrs from April 2021) to improve our offer to citizens and create a learning culture from complaints with the expectation that this investment could reduce over the 2yr period. Within the first year the service achieved the enablers for successful implementation and progression. The outcomes were as follows;

- One system for all complaints, Member enquiries, comments and compliments
- An updated complaints policy, creation of Unreasonable/Unreasonably persistent policy and Member's protocol.
- Dedicated complaints teams embedded within each Directorate to investigate, challenge and support improvements
- Robust quality assurance undertaken within the service on the quality of response to ensure the outcomes for the citizen are effectively investigated and show empathy and positive tone. This work is assisting the teams to learn and improve the way responses are written and received which will improve delivery of an empathetic response and resolution to go beyond the customers' expectations.
- Comprehensive single point reporting which provides detailed analysis of complaints and enquiries.
- Member's reporting has been developed which includes ward root cause analysis. These dashboards are ready for testing by Member's during September 2022.
- Service improvement plans within each Directorate initiated through the comprehensive data readily available to improve the citizen experience. The interrogation of the data also identifies complaints closed as 'not justified' to see what can be actioned to reduce complaints when the correct policy or process has been followed.
- Case studies that bring the data alive are developed for each service area to review the journey for the citizen whilst identifying areas of good/poor practice across the Council. These enable improvements and highlight where complaints could be avoided.

8.3. In year 1 there has been a reduction in escalated (stage 2) complaints by 3% from 13% of stage 1 complaints in 2020/21 converted to stage 2, compared to 8% of Stage 1 complaints converted in 2021/22. Over 2021/22 there was a reduction in upheld Ombudsman complaints of 10% (Q1, 38% Q4, 28%).

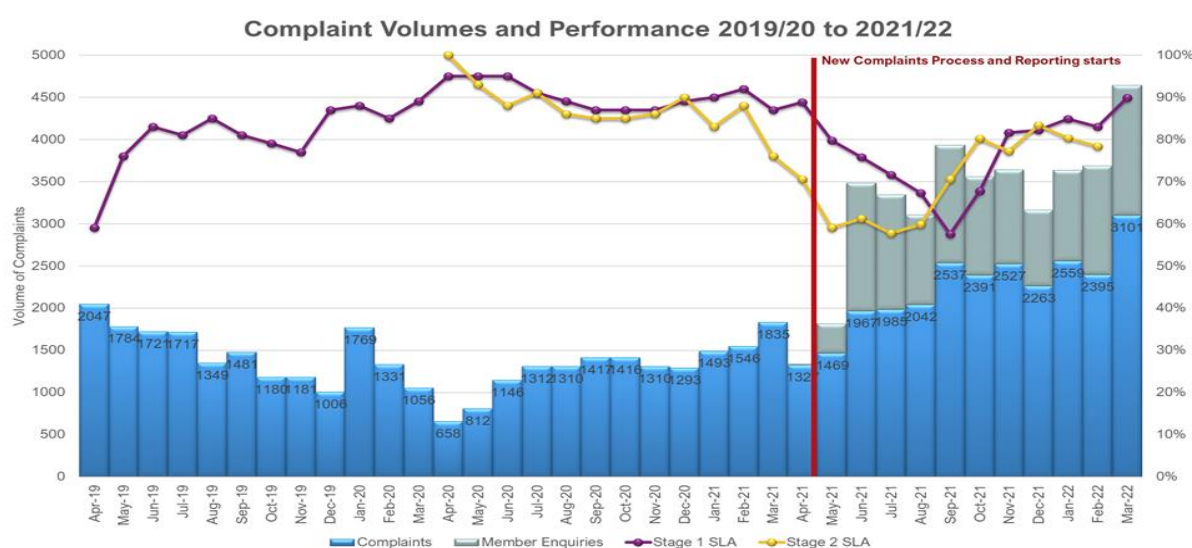
8.4. With all complaints in one system the Council can now see the true volume of complaints into the Council (complaints received 2020/21 verses 2021/22). Prior to launch, the volume of complaints received at both stages for 2020/21 was 15,547. For the same period 2021/22 the service received 26,555.

8.5. Prior to the launch of the new process there was no single point of entry for Member's enquiries and Member complaints presenting a difficulty to determine a true level received per year. Members often sent enquiries directly into services with no visibility, and high level of dissatisfaction from members was fed back relating to the lack of response from the service area. It was projected that volumes from Members would increase throughput into the single entry by

approximately 10%. However, the first full year post go live saw 11,242 enquiries directed through the single channel for investigation, a significant increase on Member volumes that were able to be recorded prior to the new service launch.

8.5.1. As you can see from Figure 4 below with the addition of the Members enquiry service the volumes remain unprecedented within Birmingham City Council, although volumes before the implementation of the new system, process and policy are not reliable.

Figure 4 – Complaint volumes and Performance 2019/20 to 2021/22



8.6. There is an expectation for year two of this project that service improvement activity and service transformations across the Council will create a reduction in complaint volume which in turn will reduce the resource allocation required for teams. However, due to the delay of such projects across the Council and the volumes that the services are currently experiencing, there is a risk that the full outcomes will not be achieved within the projected 2-year period. A Business Case to extend the funding is being put forward on the basis that we have not seen the reduction of complaints that was expected, we have in fact seen an increase.

8.7. The service improvement activity required in Directorates informed by learning from complaints is not being implemented at the scale and pace required in order to reduce complaint handling teams down to the planned levels, therefore there is a risk that with only one year funding remaining if we do not receive approval to extend contracts, service levels will dip to levels which would not be deemed acceptable and place the authority at risk of reputational damage.

9. Examples of how we are using the complaints data to improve the customer experience

9.1. City Operations – Missed Assisted collections

The service has created a better way to manage the information on a dynamic basis to triangulate data from complaints, service requests, and dropped work. This has then identified the top repeat citizens/addresses for the service to focus on a long-term solution.

There are monthly waste tasking sessions which focus on specific repeat addresses. The agenda will be dedicated to each address in the top ten list, so a maximum of thirty addresses will be discussed during the meeting. Those in the meeting will review each property or address and agree on a completion deadline and an identified responsible officer

Reported benefits for this piece of work are expected from Month 2 onwards (September 2022) which we expect to show the previous top ten from last month have not featured since for complaints, service requests, and dropped work. However, there is now some evidence of reductions in complaints received

A process of tracking improvement has been implemented to evidence this improvement. The intention is to report back to City Operations management with the findings following the first 4 sessions. It is expected that we will be recommending a programme of work for 2023 at this stage to continue to realise improvements. The specific focus is to on where we keep getting the customer experience wrong to ensure the cycle is broken and lessons learnt for continuous improvement.

9.2. Cross Directorate Project in the Ladywood Ward

There were a higher than usual amount of Member Enquiries from the Ward Councillors for Ladywood Ward, which were about a small number of roads experiencing a number of difficulties. We examined the complaints and Member enquiries data, to look at the number and type of complaints coming through for this area. We found that there was a combination of issues that caused the complaints.

- Waste often left on the street – numerous causes but includes, Waste not collected, Fly-tipping, Dropped waste from passers-by
- Poor Parking – which can cause Bin collections to not happen
- Area has a lot of houses with multiple occupants (HMOs) and student accommodation – residents are often short term and may have less pride in area or not know how to dispose of waste correctly.
- Lots of building /renovations happening and builders skips, supplies and waste is often located in the roads and can add to the waste issues.
- Anti-Social Behaviour – often reported close by in the Ballroom Car Park (now gated and not in use)

We used the complaints data and the information gained from the Councillors to bring together the right services from across the Council to look at what we could achieve to make a positive impact for the residents of this area.

The project is ongoing, we are looking at transferring all households onto the same type of bin collection, to reduce the need for so many wagons to access the roads. We have been out to remove fly-tipping and are looking to support residents and community champions with Clean-up days, waste education and community waste days throughout the year.

We are also working on visiting all the Licensable Landlords in the area, and as part of the conversation talk about waste compliance and regulations.

9.3. City Housing - Housing Applications backlog

In September 2021 the Housing Applications Team had backlogs of circa 14,912 applications awaiting processing which was impacting citizens joining the housing register and prompting the increase in complaints within the service. In Q2 and Q3 of 2021 City Housing managing applications received 648 complaints relating to applications with the root cause of 'delay in doing something' reaching 33% as the main problem category of complaints for City Housing.

15 interim support advisors were provided by Customer Services to assist with reducing the backlog of applications. The additional support worked between September 2021 and January 2022 and reduced the number of applications to 5,727 which was handed back to the service, who recruited an additional 7.5 FTE to manage this workload. This workload as of 31st August 2022 is currently at 4,655. Since the intervention Q4 2021 and Q1 2022 has received 304 complaints (221 in Q4 and a further reduction to 83 in Q1 2022) related to applications a reduction of 344 complaints overall with a downward trend in this area.

10. What are the Next steps for the Complaints Work?

While much of the complaints work has been completed, there remain some further developments to ensure it is fully embedded in what we do. These are:

- 10.1. Members Complaints and Enquiries Dashboard including Ward root cause analysis Go-Live and roll out by the end of September 2022
- 10.2. Continuation of service improvement activity
- 10.3. Understand and embed learning from Ombudsman outcomes
- 10.4. Develop and submit Business Case for the extension of funding from April 2023.
- 10.5. Further analysis work to be undertaken to develop speedier solutions for Member's enquiries

11.Appendices

- 11.1. Appendix A: Customer Service Strategy Commitments
- 11.2. Appendix B: Discovery recommendations
- 11.3. Appendix C: Proposed programme roadmap