



Contacting the Council – Improving Satisfaction

Service improvements
Contact Centre
channel shift
Customer Service
Satisfaction
Citizens

A report from Overview & Scrutiny





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Preface

By Councillor Waseem Zaffar, Chair of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee



Over the last year, there has rightly been much emphasis on the need to improve across the Council in response to the Kerslake report of 2014. In amongst that, however, we must not lose sight of the need to continue to deliver basic services to our citizens in a timely and satisfactory manner.

The Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee therefore chose to maintain a keen focus on citizens' experiences of contacting the City Council across a range of service areas.

There is a lot of positive work to report, and clearly that has had an impact on the experience citizens have when they contact the council. Firstly, the City Council now has a more rigorous (and external) measurement of customer satisfaction, which includes measuring the "end to end service". Whilst those results initially showed a very low level of satisfaction, the scores have now improved significantly.

Secondly, the decision to take back management of the Contact Centre from Service Birmingham in 2014 has allowed the City Council to respond flexibly and quickly to any negative feedback in the surveys – resulting in the increases in satisfaction that we have seen.

However, we are still some way from providing a consistently high quality service. We need to get better at responding to citizens and, just as importantly, listening to their views on how to improve services. We also need to recognise the necessity of focusing on the needs of citizens in our city as citizens rather than just as customers.

This report provides a snapshot of where we are now with regards to the contact centre, customer satisfaction and the work done by Cabinet Members and officers. I hope both members and citizens reading this report will gain a greater understanding of the work being done, but will also contribute to the debate on how we can improve yet further.

I would like to thank the Committee for the productive evidence gathering sessions, and to the officers for their support on this inquiry. It's also important to thank all those responsible, in both the customer services team and in the service areas, for the positive changes that we've seen.



1 Our Inquiry

1.1 Purpose

- 1.1.1 This inquiry set out to review customer satisfaction with the main routes that citizens use for contacting the City Council and to identify how that satisfaction could be increased.
- 1.1.2 Our findings are set out in this report; supporting information can be found in the pack of evidence on our website.¹

1.2 Our Approach

- 1.2.1 Citizens' experiences of contacting the City Council have long been a concern to Overview & Scrutiny. Committee members have been keen to see maximum improvement in customer services and in end-to-end service delivery, i.e. not just the quality of the call but whether the request was completed to the citizen's satisfaction.
- 1.2.2 At the beginning of the municipal year, the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) Committee agreed to continue the overview approach taken by the former Governance, Resources and Customer Services O&S Committee over the past three years.
- 1.2.3 In doing so, we have been pleased to see some real shifts in the last year. Firstly, the City Council now has a more rigorous (and external) measurement of customer satisfaction, which includes measuring the "end to end service". Those results initially showed a very low level of satisfaction.
- 1.2.4 Secondly, the decision to take back management of the Contact Centre from Service Birmingham in 2014 has been the biggest single factor in enabling the City Council to respond flexibly and quickly to the negative feedback in the surveys. There is clear evidence that this valuable information is being acted upon, and is having a positive impact.
- 1.2.5 Customer satisfaction rates have now risen to a level comparable with other local authorities; however there is still much to be done to offer a consistently excellent service.
- 1.2.6 In this inquiry, we considered these two key changes and the changes in customer satisfaction scores (Chapter 2); then we explored the activity taken to address issues raised by the surveys (Chapter 3). Our conclusions and recommendations are set out in Chapter 5.

¹ The evidence pack can be found at: <http://bit.ly/1PsgLmX>



Evidence Gathering

- 1.2.7 We gathered evidence through sessions held in July and November 2015², and a visit to the Contact Centre, also in November 2015. We would like to thank the following for their help and time:
- Chris Gibbs, Service Director, Customer Services
 - Paula Buckley, Assistant Director, Customer Services Centre
 - Georgina Foxwell, Head of Business Change and Service Improvement, Customer Services
 - Geraldine Collins, Head of Operations, Customer Services
 - Evelyn Bingham, Senior Service Manager – Supplier, Customer Services
 - Phil Doherty – Head of Client Services
 - Sue Jones, Contract Director, Service Birmingham Revenues
 - Jacqui Kennedy, Strategic Director – Place (Interim)
- 1.2.8 Meeting the advisors and Resolution Champions in the Contact Centre was extremely valuable, giving us greater insight into their roles and what they do day-to-day. We recommend all councillors take advantage of opportunities to visit the Contact Centre.
- 1.2.9 The Committee chose to focus on two service areas, as examples: fleet and waste management and council tax collection. The two service areas chosen are high volume and data seen in July showed that the revenues service had the highest level of customer satisfaction whilst environmental issues (including fleet and waste) had the lowest. It was therefore agreed that these would provide a good indication of the progress made.
- 1.2.10 Originally, we had wanted to look at housing repairs; however we were advised that the City Council was re-procuring the repairs contract, and customer services formed part of that procurement process for the new contract. Therefore, the Committee agreed to defer consideration of this service area.
- 1.2.11 In our December meeting, we considered the implementation of the Birmingham Promise, launched in April 2015.² Whilst not directly covering the same ground as our inquiry, consideration of the Birmingham Promise does complement our work as it is about making sure residents are aware of the standards of service they can expect, which does have a bearing on satisfaction.

² The meetings can be viewed at <http://www.birmingham.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcasts> for approximately 12 months after the meeting



2 Key Changes

2.1 Measuring Customer Satisfaction

Background

- 2.1.1 Prior to 2014, customer satisfaction with the corporate Contact Centre (then managed by Service Birmingham) was measured through an end of call survey. Advisors elected whether to send citizens through to the survey. Customer Satisfaction was a performance indicator under the Service Birmingham Contact Centre contract and its average monthly performance for customer satisfaction was well above the contractual target of 85% despite anecdotal feedback from citizens and councillors that suggested otherwise.
- 2.1.2 In March 2014 Customer Services took the decision to suspend the Service Birmingham customer satisfaction measurement and commission an independent survey, who then sent SMS and email surveys to citizens.
- 2.1.3 Following the March/April pilot, Ember was re-commissioned to conduct the surveys from August 2014.

Methodology

- 2.1.4 Customer satisfaction is now measured via:
 - A survey sent via SMS to a proportion (randomly selected) of citizens who had called the Contact Centre via their mobile (approximately 65% of callers use their mobile). This survey measures satisfaction with the Contact Centre. A text message, sent within 24 hours of their call, directs citizens to a website where they respond to six questions (each question is scored on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent). Additionally, citizens may leave a comment on why they scored as they did. An individual will only receive a maximum of one text per month and has the option to opt out;
 - A further e-mail survey sent to all citizens whose service request has been marked as complete within the Customer Relations Management (CRM) system (typically these service requests are fulfilled by the service area directly). The survey is similar in nature to the SMS text survey although the questions are directed to how satisfied the citizen was with the whole service provided by the City Council and not just by the Contact Centre.
- 2.1.5 The questions used in the survey are contained in the evidence pack.
- 2.1.6 The service areas involved in these surveys are those services using the Contact Centre and the Customer Relations Management (CRM) system, i.e.:
 - Environmental (including waste management);



- Housing repairs;
- Highways;
- Planning;
- Elections;
- Parks;
- Parking;
- Environmental Health;
- Neighbourhood Office calls;
- Safer Communities Team

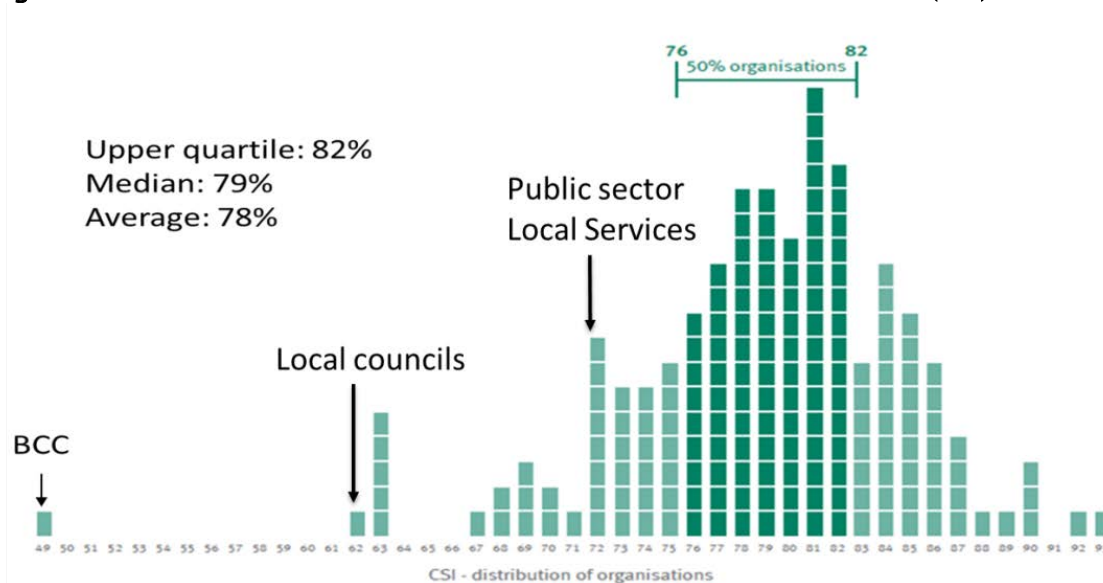
2.1.7 Revenues and Benefits also use the Contact Centre but not CRM, so citizens contacting these services only get the first, SMS, survey. This is being reviewed and, if the cost is not prohibitive, revenues and benefits will be moved to the CRM system.

Customer Satisfaction – Pilot Results

2.1.8 The results from surveys conducted in March and April 2014 showed a marked contrast with the previous Service Birmingham surveys. Overall satisfaction with Contact Centre services was 49.4% and satisfaction with the end-to-end service was 43.2%.

2.1.9 The Customer Services team benchmarked these results against the Institute of Customer Services annual customer satisfaction survey. This showed satisfaction with Birmingham well below that of the average for local councils (62%) and the average for other local services in the public sector (72%).

Figure 1: Institute of Customer Services Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI) Results (April 2014)

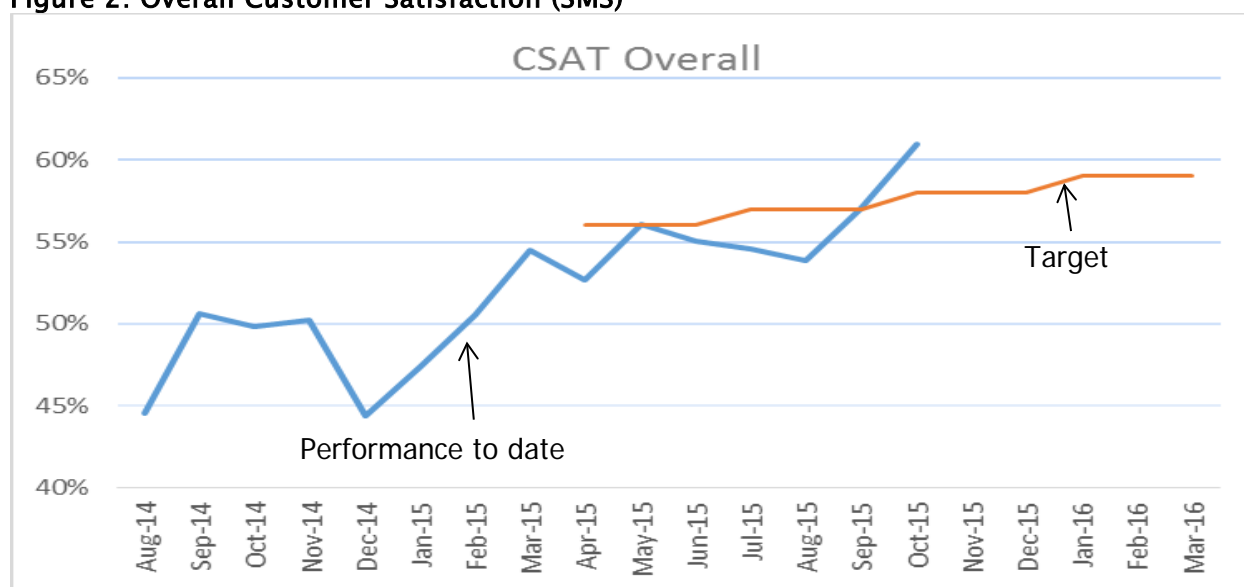




Customer Satisfaction – Latest Results

- 2.1.10 Since the pilots in April 2014, overall satisfaction has steadily increased to 63.6% in November 2015. This result puts the City Council on a par with other local authority satisfaction levels (see Figure 1 above).
- 2.1.11 Improvements in customer satisfaction were seen following the transfer of the Contact Centre in-house from 1st November 2014, although there was a dip immediately following the transfer of the Contact Centre, reflecting the huge changes that were taking place at that time (see section 2.2.2). Following that however, the trend then became one of improvement (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Overall Customer Satisfaction (SMS)



- 2.1.12 Over the last year, there has been a marked improvement in “advisor willingness to help”, from 54% to nearly 70% (Figure 3). The Committee was shown a selection of verbatim comments made on the survey and noted that many of the positive comments related to the advisor, their knowledge and helpfulness. Where negative comments were made, these were more likely to be about not being able to complete the request/service required.
- 2.1.13 Analysis of fleet and waste management and council tax responses showed:
- Customer satisfaction with fleet and waste management was 50% (for the SMS survey) and 47.7% (for the email survey) in September 2015, with advisor willingness to help rated at 62.5%. The customer satisfaction e-mail survey saw an overall downward trend in satisfaction during the Perry Barr wheelie bin roll out period (June onwards) when there was an increased level of missed collections;
 - Customer satisfaction with council tax service was 53% in September 2015; this was a dip in scores which had previously been between 55% and 60%. There was a corresponding dip in advisor willingness to help. Analysis of these figures did not reveal a clear reason for this dip,



however there was evidence of more citizens complaining about the time to get through to an advisor and dissatisfaction with the automated messaging. As detailed below, the automated messaging has been improved, and a number of new advisors were recruited to fill gaps in the teams.

- 2.1.14 Further details of fleet and waste management and council tax responses are contained in the reports to Committee, contained in the evidence pack.

Figure 3: Advisor “willingness to help”



How the Results Are Used

- 2.1.15 Since the surveys were commissioned on an on-going basis, a process for responding to issues raised was put in place. Satisfaction results are fed back to the Customer Services team on a monthly basis. Officers are able to drill down to individual service areas. Customer Services is also provided with a detailed analysis of customer feedback showing both positive and negative comments made.
- 2.1.16 These results are fed back to service areas via the six weekly Contact Centre Governance Board, and also provided to the Relationship Managers within the Customer Services team.
- 2.1.17 The Relationship Managers work with the service areas to develop Action Plans to address the areas of concern identified by the feedback via the citizen satisfaction survey. These Action Plans aim to address the root cause of dissatisfaction and are tracked regularly through face-to-face meetings on a monthly basis with the service area.



- 2.1.18 The Customer Services team (which was restructured following the move in-house) now includes a number of new roles that can provide support with issues identified in the survey e.g. process issues are referred to the new Process Improvement Analyst roles so they can address these.

2.2 Moving the Contact Centre In-House

- 2.2.1 In November 2014, the City Council took back the management of the Contact Centre from Service Birmingham. The key benefits of this move were that it would provide the City Council with cashable savings, increased visibility and more flexibility over its services. This in turn enables the City Council to service the citizens of Birmingham through one 'front door' into all City Council services; provide a consistent quality of service across all contact channels; and improve customer satisfaction.
- 2.2.2 The change did bring major upheaval for a short time – including a physical move to a new site (from Fort Dunlop to the City Council building at Woodcock Street with a second site at Lancaster Circus to give the service some resilience) and significant personnel changes (as none of the managers chose to move across from Service Birmingham to employment at the City Council). However, it has in the longer term yielded significant benefits. Significant savings of £33.7m are being made over a period of seven years. It also facilitated the launch of the "One Contact vision", to rationalise all the customer contact into one customer services department.

Figure 4: "One Contact Vision"

- One door – One very obvious and very well sign posted route into the City Council either digitally or by phone;
- One and done – A passion from the customer services team to ensure contact is reduced to an absolute minimum and wherever possible delivering success from a single contact;
- One set of content – Citizens would be served the same consistent and high quality information and also be able to perform the same transactions irrespective of channel or agent;
- One easy experience – to make it easy for citizens to request services with the least amount of effort, irrespective of channel. Agents will be knowledgeable, courteous and helpful, leading and supporting customers through to a satisfactory resolution;
- One voice of the citizen – Citizen feedback is vital and Customer Services will be the centre of excellence within the City Council providing expertise in collation, analysis and feedback of citizen insights. The feedback will form the basis of a rolling programme of improvements (not only reporting raw statistics or customer sound bites but providing actual practical actions leading to improvements not only in customer satisfaction but in demonstrable efficiency savings across all City Council services).



- 2.2.3 This change in emphasis was a major change from the previous approach: the contract with Service Birmingham had driven an emphasis on call volumes and finishing calls as quickly as possible. The emphasis is now on resolving calls and minimising call backs. Overall call volumes have decreased by 19.5% (this year compared to last) and Council Tax volumes have decreased by 26.5% in the same period.



3 Issues Highlighted by the Survey

3.1 Introduction

- 3.1.1 After the City Council took over the management of the Contact Centre, officers in both the customer services team and in the service areas reviewed the issues highlighted by citizens in the surveys and put in place a number of measures to increase satisfaction. This work is still on-going and continues to be reactive to issues raised in the surveys.
- 3.1.2 As noted in the previous chapter, customer satisfaction has increased over the last year, and this chapter summarises actions taken to date that have contributed to that increase, along with further planned activity.

3.2 Empathy with Customers

- 3.2.1 Initial results on “advisor willingness to help” showed satisfaction scores of around 55%. The evidence from the surveys was that citizens felt that some advisors lacked empathy.
- 3.2.2 Following the Contact Centre move in-house, an extensive soft skills training programme was put in place, including:
- Coaching skills for Team Managers;
 - New customer service training including a specific module developed to focus on empathy.
- 3.2.3 The training programme was backed up by a complete revision and re-launch of the quality monitoring procedure used within the Contact Centre to measure the quality of calls. The previous quality monitoring procedure had little focus on soft skills. The new way of evaluating quality is built around the vision and values of the Council with a heavy emphasis on soft skills.
- 3.2.4 Importantly, excellent performance is also recognised. A “golden call” awards was launched to recognise those advisors who go the extra mile. Staff forums are also held to allow advisors to feedback on their experiences.
- 3.2.5 During our visit, we were impressed by how the staff handled the calls – they were efficient and showed empathy; they explained difficult issues well (e.g. paying for a missing wheelie bin) and offered additional advice to citizens from picking up clues in the call. However, members picked up one suggestion for improvement: an advisor was heard advising a caller at the start of the call that they could use the website – we felt that this came across as unwelcoming and should not be said so early in the call.



3.3 Getting Issues Resolved

- 3.3.1 A recurring complaint from both previous scrutiny work and from the surveys was that there were too many unresolved issues, which often led to repeat calls. A number of initiatives have been introduced since last autumn to address this.

Introducing Resolution Champions

- 3.3.2 Resolution Champions were introduced to deal with escalated enquiries, repeated service failure, complaints and “on the call” issues that arise. Their objectives are to reduce repeat calls, improve the citizen experience and remove the need for further escalation or complaint.
- 3.3.3 To achieve this, they work closely with members of staff within the service area to gain useful background information and to discuss challenges. This enables them to progress updates and request assistance on a case in order to resolve any customer concerns quickly. Resolution Champions will also call the customer back to give them an update on what they have done and to give them reassurance that action has been taken. They are able to contact the enforcement agents if they feel this is appropriate.
- 3.3.4 The table below (Figure 5) sets out the areas that the Fleet and Waste Management and Council Tax Resolution Champions dealt with over a three month period. Fleet & Waste advisors have four Resolution Champions and Council Tax Advisors have five.

Figure 5: Resolution Champions (July to September 2015)

Fleet and Waste Management: 344 escalations	Council Tax: 250 escalations
85% of these were connected to six specific areas <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Missed collections - 43%• Collection of old bins and recycling boxes - 20%• Wheelie bins - 6%• Fly tipping – 6%• Clinical waste – 6%• Bulky waste – 4%	81 – Customers not happy with the Council Tax recovery process/policy – 32.4% 64 – Query regarding the process (correct process had been followed) 25.6% 33 – Service Error (Back office process delays account not updated) 13.2% 33 – Advisor Error (Contact Centre Error) 13.2% 18 – Enforcement agent cases – 7.2% 17 – Customer error – 6.8% 2 – Staff Behaviour (Lack of soft skills) – 0.8% 1 – Complaint avoided – 0.4% 1 – Complaint Escalated – 0.4%

- 3.3.5 During our visit to the Contact Centre, members met with some Resolution Champions. The introduction of the role has clearly made an important difference and is extremely useful. We also noted that the introduction of Resolution Champions meant that there were opportunities for advisors to progress which would assist with staff retention and career development.



- 3.3.6 Future plans for Resolution Champions include the development of a database to record all their interactions, which would allow officers to evaluate the volumes, nature and outcomes to the resolutions they are managing. The database will provide management insight to identify:
- Service failure themes and causes;
 - Service improvements;
 - Volume reduction opportunities;
 - Improve first call resolution;
 - Identify any knowledge gaps or training needs.

Contact Centre and Service Areas Closer Working

- 3.3.7 Closer working with the service areas generally has helped with quicker resolution of issues. The previous disconnect between those working in the service areas and those working in the Contact Centre was recognised and addressed through a series of “Day in the Life” sessions with Benefits, Housing Repairs, Fleet and Waste, Environmental Health, Parks, Planning, Elections and Revenues.
- 3.3.8 These sessions allowed Team Managers and Advisors to spend a day with the service areas to build a comprehensive understanding of those service areas and how they operate. This resulted in Team Managers having an increased knowledge of the whole process and improved relationships with service areas which are useful to handle escalated issues or complaints.
- 3.3.9 The need for services to keep the Contact Centre informed of any service disruptions has also been noted and acted upon: for example, each of the Fleet and Waste depots now report on the day's service interruptions to the Contact Centre. For example, an e-mail alert is sent by the depot team detailing the streets where a missed collection has taken place. The alert also provides an explanation for the missed collection, such as a vehicle breakdown, shortage of drivers or a street access issue. A missed collection is still recorded but, if the Contact Centre knows that collections have been missed, and why, citizens can have increased confidence that service interruptions are being recognised and dealt with.
- 3.3.10 This will be further assisted when mobile technology ('slab in the cab') is introduced to waste collection vehicles. The driver can see where assisted collections have been requested and record where waste is not presented for collection. This should allow for increased reliability of missed collection data for the Contact Centre and performance data for the collection teams. This technology is in the process of being installed in all collection vehicles.



3.4 Clear Communications

Accurate Messages

- 3.4.1 A recurring complaint from previous years was citizens receiving inaccurate messages from the CRM system – saying a job had been completed when it had not (e.g. the missed collection was still sat outside). These messages are automatically generated when the job is closed down on the system. There have been some improvements here, though there is evidence that this is still happening. This continues to be monitored.
- 3.4.2 What will also assist citizens is more useful information in those messages; existing messages were not specific or helpful. This meant the update could cause additional follow up calls or complaints. A review of all alerts has been undertaken to make the updates more meaningful, for example:

Old Update	New Update
<i>Update for:</i> Missed Collection <i>Ref:</i> 800012345 <i>Status:</i> Closed-Not Collected – Bin Tagged	<i>Update for:</i> Missed Collection <i>Ref:</i> 800012345 <i>Status:</i> Sorry, we can't action this request as our records tell us your bin has been tagged. There is information on the tag that tells you why your bin hasn't been emptied. Further information can be found at birmingham.gov.uk/recycling

Streamlining Telephone Messages

- 3.4.3 The surveys highlighted that customers were dissatisfied with the automated routing system used by the Contact Centre. Sometimes known as IVR (Interactive Voice Response), the automated telephony system enables the caller to select an option using the telephone touch-tone keypad to direct the enquiry or obtain additional information before speaking to an advisor.
- 3.4.4 Following this feedback, Customer Services therefore undertook a full review of the existing IVR messages, in order to:
- Remove repeated messages;
 - Reduce the amount of messaging and wording;
 - Reduce the number of selection menus and options to press;
 - Reduce the time to reach an advisor.
- 3.4.5 The new system was implemented in November, with a number of benefits including:



Fleet and Waste	Council Tax:
In most cases there is an average of two key presses during the navigation of the IVR (three maximum). This is in line with industry best practice.	The number of options on the main Council Tax menu has reduced to just three options whereas previously it was five.
The average amount of time it takes to reach an advisor has reduced (from 2.20 minutes to an average of 60 seconds when reporting a missed collection; and from 1.50 minutes to an average of 1.05 when requesting the garden waste service).	The typical journey through the IVR has reduced to around one minute, from 3 minutes 27 seconds for a change in circumstances and 2 minutes 43 seconds for a reminder letter.

3.5 Website Improvements

3.5.1 A number of changes to the website have been implemented over the last year, including:

- The home page changed in order to provide easier access to the highest volume services;
- The “Do It Online” page changed to ensure that high volume transactional services are prioritised;
- Directorates and Customer Services have reduced out of date and redundant information on their pages. This reduced pages from 10,000 in 2012 to just over 4,500 in January 2015;
- The “Contact Us” page has been re-designed and focusses on encouraging citizens to stay online.

3.5.2 Since the meeting, webchat has been introduced. Usage figures are set out below.

Figure 6: Webchat statistics

Live Chat Statistics: 01 Jan 2015 - 31 Oct 2015

MONTH	REQUESTED ENGAGEMENTS	CONNECTED ENGAGEMENTS	CONNECTION RATE	INTERACTIVE ENGAGEMENTS WHERE VISITOR ENGAGED IN TEXT	INTERACTIVE RATE	ABANDONED ENGAGEMENTS	ABANDONED RATE
January	838	834	99.5%	764	91.6%	4	0.5%
February	877	874	99.7%	819	93.7%	3	0.3%
March	1094	1081	98.8%	1023	94.6%	13	1.2%
April	1071	1060	99.0%	990	93.4%	11	1.0%
May	793	781	98.5%	736	94.2%	12	1.5%
June	976	960	98.4%	892	92.9%	16	1.6%
July	1141	1117	97.9%	1040	93.1%	24	2.1%
August	726	698	96.1%	633	90.7%	28	3.9%
September	815	782	96.0%	701	89.6%	33	4.0%
October	1057	990	93.7%	908	91.7%	67	6.3%
Total	9388	9177	97.8%	8506	92.7%	211	2.2%

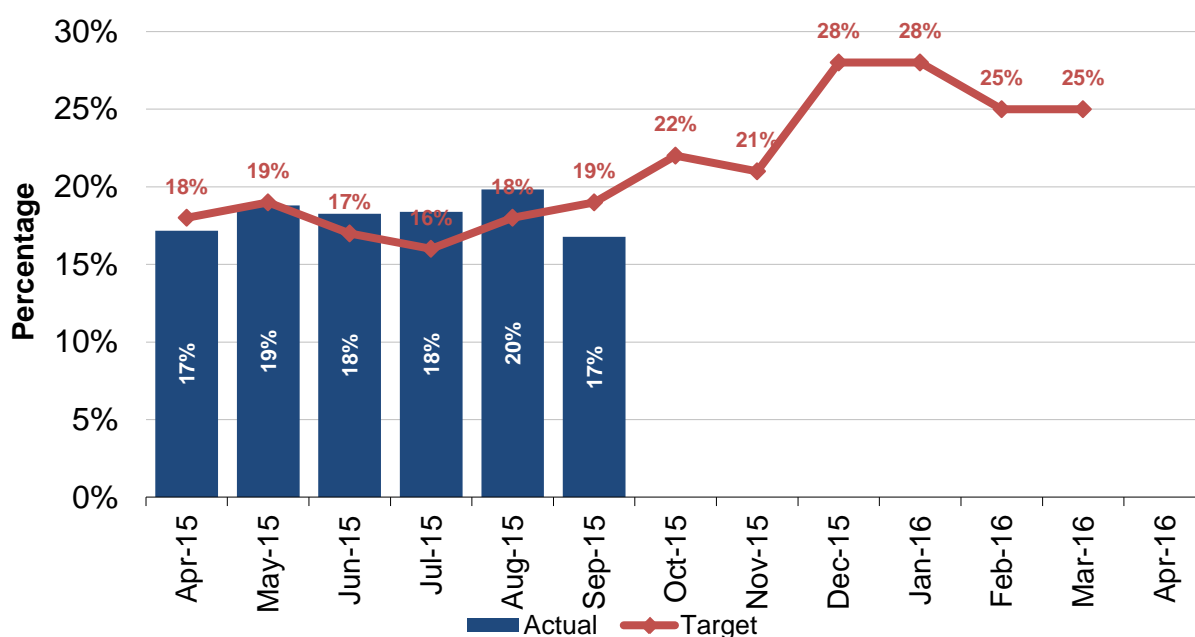


- 3.5.3 However, there is still some dissatisfaction with the web, but to progress further the content management system (Fatwire) needs to be replaced. New systems are being evaluated at the time of writing.
- 3.5.4 One aspect that impressed us on our visit was the ability of advisors to pick up issues mentioned on twitter (when a citizen tweets in response to a general tweet, raising an issue that has not been resolved). These are fed back to the Contact Centre to enable a Resolution Champion to follow it up and resolve that issue.

Phone to Web Channel Shift

- 3.5.5 Getting the website right is not only important for our citizens, but it will also help the City Council achieve targets on “channel shift” – i.e. encouraging, as far as possible, people to use the website and self-service options rather than phone in. This is necessary if the City Council is to make the savings that are needed.

Figure 7: Channel Shift



- 3.5.6 Channel shift is a corporate target. In 2015/16 four key services are included in the measurement of the target – Benefits, Council Tax, Fleet and Waste Management and Housing Repairs. With regards to the two services we considered:
- Revenues: channel shift performance has been in line with or slightly exceeded the forecasts for 2015/16. Analysis shows that the volume of calls in 2015/16 is on average 26.5% lower



than in 2014/15 whilst the volume of online transactions completed is fairly static at an average of 11,600 per month;

- Fleet and Waste Management: channel shift performance has been in line with the forecasts for 2015. The roll out of wheelie bins from the Perry Barr depot did have a negative impact (up to 10% when citizens turned to the telephone to notify of service failure); however higher levels of channel shift was achieved in months where there was more stability.

3.5.7 We discussed the targets and whether some were too ambitious. There are clearly some events that will have an impact on the achievement of targets – for example the roll-out of wheelie bins from the Lifford Lane depot (which was happening at the time of writing). The expectation was that use of the web rather than phone would then stabilise.

3.5.8 Encouraging citizens to move from calling the Contact Centre to using the website has so far encompassed a range of initiatives on the website and within service area (see Figure 8 overleaf).

3.5.9 Future plans for the website include using the web to publish notifications which would alert citizens when and where there may be service interruptions (e.g. severe weather or vehicle breakdowns affecting waste collection). This would reduce the need for people to call the Contact Centre to find out what is happening. This is currently being considered.

3.5.10 Another option is to use the “Birmingham Alerts” database to target e-mail alerts to citizens who have consented to receiving updates. Using the data from Birmingham Alerts could be used to inform members of the public about:

- When garden waste collections are due to end;
- When garden waste renewals for 2016 can be purchased from;
- Information concerning Christmas collections;
- Wheelie bins updates;
- Recycling updates.



Figure 8: Initiatives to reduce call volumes

<p><i>Making information more easily available:</i></p> <p>e.g.</p> <p>Having online delivery schedules for when wheelie bins will be delivered to their property;</p> <p>Introducing My local information pages, enabling residents to find out collection dates, amongst other things;</p> <p>Re-designing the Council Tax landing page around usage evidence and citizen priorities and complaints to allow easy access to services and content.</p>	<p><i>Making information more easily understandable:</i></p> <p>e.g. Reviewing council tax bill, reminder notices and summons as previously wording was not clear and caused confusion (27% of all calls during September were as a result of receiving a bill).</p> <p>A number of changes were made to the look and feel, plain English has been used and some "nudging" techniques have been used to encourage customers to sign up for direct debit. This will result in savings against printing and postage costs, reduce calls coming into the Contact Centre and reduce recovery action.</p>
<p><i>Information related to specific events:</i></p> <p>e.g. when wheelie bins are being rolled out,</p> <p>More information has been added to raise awareness,</p> <p>Advice has been added to inform of next steps once the bin has been delivered, cut-off dates for requests for additional or larger bins etc</p>	<p><i>Giving self-service links more prominence on the home page</i></p> <p>e.g. "Making a Council Tax payment" has been added to the home page as a top task and this has resulted in an increase in the number of citizens utilising the online automated payment facility</p>
<p><i>Encouraging feedback:</i></p> <p>e.g. a feedback widget has been applied to all of the Council Tax pages. This enables customer feedback (both positive and negative) to be routed through to the Web Team as soon as it has been left. The Web Team are then able to make changes to the pages very quickly and let the citizen know as soon as this has been done.</p>	



4 Birmingham Promise

4.1 Background

- 4.1.1 In the 2014/15 municipal year, the Deputy Leader undertook to introduce a “Birmingham Promise”, which would be a public statement of what residents can expect from the City Council with regard to certain services, recognising that “good customer service is not just about how quickly we answer the phone or how politely we talk to our citizens ... The most important element of customer service is how quickly we actually resolve your enquiries and requests”.
- 4.1.2 The Deputy Leader asked the Governance, Resources and Customer Services O&S Committee to look at the Birmingham Promise, to consider what should be included within the Promise, the reporting mechanisms and the consequences for both good and poor performance.
- 4.1.3 That Committee duly reported to the Deputy Leader in February 2015, and the Birmingham Promise was launched in April 2015.
- 4.1.4 A copy of the Birmingham Promise is included in the evidence pack.
- 4.1.5 A review was conducted in Autumn 2015, including
- Analysis of the number of views of the Birmingham Promise web page;
 - Discussion about the Birmingham Promise at the recent citizen panels run by Customer Services;
 - Service Areas and other stakeholders such as the Corporate Performance Management Team were asked to provide their views.
- 4.1.6 The report produced by Customer Services is included in the evidence pack.

4.2 Progress Report

- 4.2.1 The Committee considered the review report at their meeting on the 8th December. It was noted that two measures had been suspended from the original promise and the Chair of the Committee wrote to the relevant Cabinet Members to ask for an explanation.
- 4.2.2 One of the measures suspended related to Blue Badges:
1. Process application form for a blue badge within 8 weeks;
 2. Post to your address a renewal notice 10 weeks before your blue badge is due to expire.
- 4.2.3 The Cabinet Member for Health and Social care explained that the first measure is still being monitored by officers. In relation to the second, the system for sending out renewal notices is operated by a third party on behalf of central government and the City Council only receive



notifications if a renewal notice has not been sent. This means that, whilst officers could assume that as no notifications have been received then we have fully met our promise, in actual fact they are unable to confirm a robust result. Therefore, following discussions at the Performance Star Chamber meeting in September, it was agreed that this Promise be proposed for exclusion from future updates for the remainder of this financial year.

4.2.4 The second measure suspended related to missed collections. The Cabinet Member for Sustainability reported back to the Committee that the measure had been amended so that residents can now report missed recycling collections up to 13 days after the event and missed residual collections up to six days after the event. The resultant performance measure is now that the service has to collect the recycling/rubbish within three calendar days from when the resident reported it.

4.2.5 In considering the promise as a whole, we resolved that the Birmingham Promise should continue but that some changes are necessary to ensure it works well. The following points were made:

- The use of “absolute measures”: this was a recommendation of the original scrutiny report, however this has led to two simultaneous targets for some services: the Birmingham Promise target of 100% and the contractual target. Given the pressures on resources, we think that the Birmingham Promise should reflect contractual targets: if these are met, then the Birmingham Promise is met. However, explanations should be given to those citizens who do not receive the service as specified.
- The use of calendar days *v.* working days: the original scrutiny report suggested trialling calendar days as there was a view that this would be clearer for citizens; however the feedback has been that “working days” is commonly used and well understood by the public to mean Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays). Working days should therefore be used to ensure targets remain in line with contractual requirements;
- Communication of the Birmingham Promise had been poor and should be improved. We suggest that the key standards are simplified and put on a single page document, which is displayed in council buildings across the city.
- The language used to describe the expectations of citizens should be reviewed. References to using “the correct channels” could be made clearer, for example;
- Monitoring should continue to take place monthly so that corrective action can be taken when needed; however publication of the results need only be annually or bi-annually.

4.2.6 In short, the Birmingham Promise should continue to be meaningful, deliverable and measurable. The key is firstly to make clear information about the standards of service and performance that citizens can expect available to citizens in one short document; and secondly we must deliver those standards.



5 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Real Progress Has Been Made...

- 5.1.1 One of the key findings from this short inquiry is that things are improving, and demonstrably so. The increase in customer satisfaction – albeit from a very low base – is significant, and for the first time we can have real confidence in the figures supplied. It is also clear that the information being gathered is being acted upon.
- 5.1.2 The last 12 months has moved us some way from the findings of previous scrutiny overviews on this subject: the real step changes have been the result of co-operation between Contact Centre and service areas, facilitated in large part by the decision to bring the Contact Centre in-house. Previously, scrutiny findings were dominated by the lack of trust and co-operation between the two areas, which did not act as one organisation. Now, there is much closer working and evidence of collaboration to find solutions.
- 5.1.3 The focus on outcomes and quality has made a real difference, and we recognise that the progress is owing to the hard work and dedication of customer services staff and staff in service areas.

5.2 ...But There's More to be Done

- 5.2.1 Nonetheless, we know from talking to our residents that significant improvements still need to be made.
- 5.2.2 Firstly, the improved scores need to be maintained, and where possible, improved further. Given the great strides made this year, it may be tempting to go for an ambitious target for next year. We are now close to the local councils' average score of 62% (see Figure 1 on page 6). However, other public sector local services have an average of 72% and the top 50 organisations have between 77% and 82% of customers that are satisfied. So there is clearly therefore room for further improvement.
- 5.2.3 However, this must be balanced with the need to make further savings of £300,000 and to reduce call handling times, which must be achieved without affecting the quality of the calls. We should also bear in mind that simple comparisons with other organisations are not always valid; for example some have a much more focused business area, whereas the City Council has a wide range of services. Customers also have some choice in their use of other private organisations, but must deal with the City Council within the area that they work – this can have a negative impact on satisfaction scores.
- 5.2.4 Secondly, there should be scope to widen the customer satisfaction surveys to ensure we are capturing as wide a range of views as possible. A set of telephone interviews with a sample of those using the Contact Centre would enable the views of those who do not use email/text



messaging to put forward their views. This could focus on key services – primarily waste and environmental services, and if there is scope highways or housing repairs. The value of these surveys is that they would reach a wider audience than email surveys and provide further data for service improvement. We therefore ask that the Deputy Leader investigate how the City Council might be able to undertake such surveys – perhaps just for one service area – to get that more robust data.

- 5.2.5 Thirdly, strengthening local links with the Contact Centre – in the way that links with service areas have been strengthened – would be beneficial. We therefore ask that consideration is given to the role of Resolution Champions (or other role within the Contact Centre) to make more of local links, to build local knowledge and to allow councillors to build relationships with them.
- 5.2.6 In addition, following our very positive experiences, we would recommend all councillors take advantage of opportunities to visit the Contact Centre and other service areas. At the time of our evidence gathering, results of the City Council staff survey were released, which indicated a lack of understanding amongst staff about what councillors do, which is likely to be related to a lack of contact with senior figures and councillors.
- 5.2.7 We found going out to meet Contact Centre staff was really informative and helped us to gain an insight into the work. This opportunity should be open to all councillors. Our suggestion is that a series of these sessions takes place in June/July so that it can form part of new members' induction.
- 5.2.8 Finally, having reviewed the progress of the Birmingham Promise during its first year of operation, we recommend that the Birmingham Promise continues, but with changes as set out below. The key is that the Birmingham Promise should make clear information about the standards of service and performance that citizens can expect available to citizens in one short document; and then we must deliver those standards.
- That the Birmingham Promise reflect existing contractual requirements: if these are met, then the Birmingham Promise is met. However, explanations should be given to those citizens who do not receive the service as specified;
 - That the Birmingham Promise uses working days as the measurement in the first year, to reflect contractual arrangements;
 - That the Birmingham Promise is simplified and put on a single page document, which is displayed in council buildings across the city;
 - That the Birmingham Promise is subject to external assessment – for example by the Plain English Campaign – to ensure that it is clear and easy to understand. In particular, the language used to describe the expectations of citizens should be reviewed. References to using “the correct channels” could be made;
 - That the Birmingham Promise is reviewed annually to ensure it remains achievable in the light of future budget cuts, and to ensure that improvements are made wherever possible;



- That the Birmingham Promise has a named officer and Cabinet Member against each promise;
- Monitoring should continue to take place quarterly so that corrective action can be taken when needed; however publication of the results need only be annually or bi-annually.

5.2.9 This recommendation should supersede those previously agreed with the Deputy Leader in early 2015.

5.3 Our Recommendations

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R01	<p>a) That targets for customer satisfaction are reviewed and ambitious but achievable measures are set to facilitate continuous improvement.</p> <p>b) That the forward plan for achieving the target is brought to an early meeting of the Corporate Resources O&S Committee.</p> <p>c) Trend analysis of all customer satisfaction data is reported to the Corporate Resources O&S Committee bi-annually.</p>	Deputy Leader	September 2016
R02	<p>That consideration is given to conducting telephone interviews with a sample of those using the Contact Centre. This could focus on one service area (e.g. waste and environmental services). The Deputy Leader is asked to report back to the Committee on costs and feasibility of conducting such surveys.</p>	Deputy Leader	June 2016
R03	<p>That consideration is given to the role of Resolution Champions (or other role within the Contact Centre) to make more of local links, to build local knowledge and to allow councillors to build relationships with them</p> <p>This must be done without disturbing the quality of the work that is being done by resolutions champions.</p>	Deputy Leader	September 2016



	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R04	<p>That members are offered the opportunity to visit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Contact Centre; • Fleet and waste depots; • Other service areas <p>to gain an insight into the work and to meet staff.</p> <p>Our suggestion is that a series of these sessions takes place in June/July so that it can form part of new members' induction.</p>	Deputy Leader	September 2016
R05	<p>With regards to the Birmingham Promise:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That the Birmingham Promise reflect existing contractual requirements: if these are met, then the Birmingham Promise is met. However, explanations should be given to those citizens who do not receive the service as specified; • That the Birmingham Promise uses working days as the measurement in the first year, to reflect contractual arrangements; • That the Birmingham Promise is simplified and put on a single page document, which is displayed in council buildings across the city. • That the Birmingham Promise is subject to external assessment – for example by the Plain English Campaign – to ensure that it is clear and easy to understand. In particular, the language used to describe the expectations of citizens should be reviewed. References to using "the correct channels" could be made; • That the Birmingham Promise is reviewed annually to ensure it remains achievable in the light of future budget cuts, and to ensure that improvements are made wherever possible; • That the Birmingham Promise has a named officer and Cabinet Member against each promise; • Monitoring should continue to take place quarterly so that corrective action can be taken when needed; however publication of the results need only be annually or bi-annually 	Deputy Leader	September 2016



	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R06	Progress towards achievement of these recommendations should be reported to the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee no later than October 2016. Subsequent progress reports will be scheduled by the Committee thereafter, until all recommendations are implemented.	Deputy Leader	October 2016

Motion to City Council

That the recommendations above be approved, and that the Executive be requested to pursue their implementation.