

Arun District Council

REPORT TO:	Corporate Support Committee
SUBJECT:	Customer Services Annual Update – 2021-2022
LEAD OFFICER:	Carolyn Martlew Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer
LEAD MEMBER:	Councillor Paul Dendle
WARDS:	All
CORPORATE PRIORITY / POLICY CONTEXT / CORPORATE VISION: Arun Direct, Customer Services, supports most Council Service Areas and Priorities	
DIRECTORATE POLICY CONTEXT: Customer Service Strategy We aim to be a customer focused organisation. We will work to understand our customers better and put them at the heart of everything we do and support customers to do more for themselves.	
FINANCIAL SUMMARY: There are no direct financial implications due to the report	

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To provide members with a brief overview of Customer Services. It specifically considers the operation of the services over the last financial year ending March 2022 and identifies emerging trends of operation comparing this with the operation over the previous 3-5 years.

The report looks in some detail at the numbers of customers contacting and accessing services offered by the council either by phone, by coming into the two reception areas or making enquiries using the Council's website and webchat, as well as via email.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 None.

3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

3.1 Arun District Council delivers a wide range of services, from waste and recycling collection impacting all residents, to much more specialist services which may affect a smaller number of residents, of equal importance, and may be to the more vulnerable members of the community. Services are provided to residents, businesses and visitors who make different demands, but all will require a responsive service that delivers consistently and aim to 'get it right first time'. This report provides an update of service delivery across all channels and statistical information to support the report.

4. DETAIL

Arun Direct (AD) was set up in 2006 to respond to the telephone enquiries made to the Council, becoming a focal point for the customer. This began with 2 services, growing today to 10 services within Arun Direct and incorporating face to face enquiries both at Littlehampton Civic Centre and Bognor Regis Town Hall; the service comes under the banner of Customer Services within the Financial Services Group since the start of July 2022.

4.1 The following services are dealt with by Customer Services who will aim to deal with the customer enquiry at the first point of contact. The services are listed below:

- Cleansing
- Benefits
- Elections
- Switchboard
- Environmental Health
- Planning
- Car Parks
- Revenues
- Building Control
- Housing Support

Switchboard is a 'signposting' service which directs external calls to the organisation. More in-depth switchboard enquiries are sometimes passed to the General Enquiries line managed by Arun Direct, however this line is predominantly used for training purposes.

4.2 Covid-19 Global Pandemic – required the Team to work from home. This continued alongside the requirement to provide a Meet and Greet face to face service at both sites.

4.3 In December 2021 we introduced an online appointment system. Initially for just one service, Land charges, further services in a phased approach, have now been included.

4.4 Our face-to-face customers have been required to use different channels to contact us and we continue to work closely with back office teams, to consider new ways of working in order to deliver a seamless service to our customers, e.g. footfall into reception areas to renew parking permits are now completed online. We continue to promote all contact channels including our webchat service, on all emails, website, and social media and when speaking to customers on the phone, as well as when they visit our offices.

4.5 Our website is still the most preferred method for our customers to obtain Council information. The figures for our customers using the website remain steady, except for Cleansing which shows an increase of 20,000 likely due to disrupted service because of available resources during the pandemic.
Appendix 4 – provides further information

Our webchat channel continues to be successful with further services added. We handled 3732 webchat interactions a similar number to the previous year. It is continuously being developed and further services added regularly. Our 'Out of

Hours' knowledge BOT has a high accuracy rate (approx. 75%) with inhouse amendments made promptly.

We continue to handle a high volume of email enquiries for various service area, and we aim to respond to these within 24 hours, Monday to Friday. 2021/22 the team handled 5294 emails.

Appendix 3 – provides further information

- 4.6 Customer services dealt with 143,403 calls, a decrease from the previous year total of 174,104. This reduction is due to not having a full team of multiskilled staff, as we experienced leavers and new recruits, resulting in the need to allocate training in order to ensure efficiency for call handling. Arun Direct also handled 3,732 webchats, this also affects the calls in figure.

During 2021/22 we handled 5290 emails, a decrease of 634 from the previous year. Customers are no longer emailing regarding Pest Control, a service we no longer provide within the Council. Tascomi use will also have impacted incoming emails.

- 4.7 Our call volumes for Council Tax and Business rates for 2021/22 have seen a decrease to 39,626 from last year, likely due to lack of skilled staff being able to handle these calls, use of webchat and customers utilising self-serve options on our website. During the latter part of 2021 calls regarding Business Rate Grants tailed off. Car Parks saw an increase of over 1,300 calls and Housing calls decreased by over 8,500, this may be due to our ADC Housing tenants not requiring the service during the pandemic and housing being the preferred method of contact. Our other service call volumes remain consistent.

Annual Billing, during March each year, Revenues Team send out around 80,000 Council Tax Bills and this has a significant impact on incoming call volumes during the month, often reaching 1000+ calls a day. This remains the same each year, however this year impacted further due to Energy Rebate enquiries at the same time.

There have been no Elections taking place, this accounts for the lower call volumes for this area, approx. 3,000.

- 4.8 Customer Services have provided support for our customers who 'come in', both at the Civic centre and Bognor Regis Town Hall, resolving enquiries where possible or signposting to services offered via our online or telephone service. Previously Civic Centre customers visited the Main Reception for all General Enquiries and Appointments. We also operated a separate Housing Support Desk to assist Housing related customers. We are now able to offer a Meet & Greet service and all Housing customers are dealt with Housing Staff based at both sites.

At Bognor Regis Town Hall, all customers were handled under the 'General Enquiries' tab, this included all Housing related enquiries as well.

December 2021 saw the first online appointment for Land charges, since then further services have now been introduced.

Appendix 2 – provides further information

4.9 In five years from 2017-2022 customer services have dealt with 943,248 across telephone, face to face interactions. Website and Webchat statistics show there appears to be an increase in customers accessing our services via alternative channels.

Appendix 5 – provides further information

4.10 Since the adoption of the Customer Services Strategy in March 2021, we have had a Team of advisors delivering bitesize bespoke workshops to various departments across the organisation. These have been very successful, and some changes have been made as a result e.g. removing contact numbers on letters and providing webchat/website/self-serve information as an alternative means of contact.

We have been able to promote the CSS via inclusion in the Corporate Induction and via HIVE.

Its available on our website for customers to view and includes our Action Plan, which is regularly updated.

4.11 Going Forward

We have reintroduced our Meet & Greet service without ‘screens’ which were built for use during the pandemic, at both the Civic Centre and Bognor Regis Town Hall. Other work includes Customer Services Team workshop to look at how we can gather customer insight/feedback, this took place in July. Further workshops are currently being planned for the organisation over the next few months. Customer Services Team are involved in the project for new telephony system, and this is ongoing.

Customer Services has been included in the Corporate Induction where we are able to introduce Customer Services and the Strategy via a presentation to new staff, who are also provided with a copy of the CSS in their ‘Starter Pack’ and invited to visit the CS Team/join Team Meetings.

Webchat is continuously being developed and we handled the highest number of webchats in May 2022 a total of 677 chats that accessed our service this way.

5. CONSULTATION

5.1 None

6. OPTIONS / ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

6.1 None

7. COMMENTS BY THE GROUP HEAD OF FINANCE/SECTION 151 OFFICER

7.1 None

8. RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

8.1 None

9. COMMENTS OF THE GROUP HEAD OF LAW AND GOVERNANCE & MONITORING OFFICER

9.1 None

10.HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT

10.1 None

11.HEALTH & SAFETY IMPACT

11.1 None

12.PROPERTY & ESTATES IMPACT

12.1 None

13.EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA) / SOCIAL VALUE

13.1 None

14.CLIMATE CHANGE & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT/SOCIAL VALUE

14.1 None

15.CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT

15.1 None

16.HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT

16.1 None

17.FREEDOM OF INFORMATION / DATA PROTECTION CONSIDERATIONS

17.1 None

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS: