

Arun District Council

REPORT TO:	Corporate Support Committee
SUBJECT:	Customer Services Annual Update – 2022/23
LEAD OFFICER:	Antony Baden Group Head
LEAD MEMBER:	Councillor Francis Oppler, Chair of Corporate Support
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: The are no financial implications arising from this report.	

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report provides members with an overview of the Customer Services performance in 2022/23. It specifically considers the operation of the services over the last financial year ending March 2023 and identifies emerging operational trends compared to 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 at Littlehampton Civic Centre and Bognor Regis Town Hall or making enquiries using the Council's website and webchat, as well as via email.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Corporate Support Committee is asked to note the report.

3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

3.1 Arun District Council delivers a wide range of services, from waste and recycling collection impacting all residents, to more specialist services affecting a smaller number of residents, including vulnerable members of the community. Services are provided to residents, businesses and visitors who have different requirements, but require a responsive service that delivers consistently and aims

to 'get it right first time'. This report provides an update of service delivery across all communication channels and statistical information to support the report.

4. DETAIL

4.1 Arun Direct (AD) was set up in 2006 to respond to the telephone enquiries made to the Council and become a focal point for our customers. It began with handling telephone enquiries for Cleansing and Environmental Health and has grown today to 10 services and includes face to face enquiries both at Littlehampton Civic Centre and Bognor Regis Town Hall. More recently the addition of a webchat facility has been added. The service has come under Customer Services within the Financial Services Group since the start of July 2022.

4.2 The following services are dealt with by Customer Services who aim to deal with the customer enquiry at the first point of contact:

- 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 a General Enquiries line managed by Arun Direct, however this line is predominantly used for training purposes. See appendix 1.

4.3 A new Telephony system for Arun Direct and the wider organisation was introduced on 28 February 2023, which has required the Team to learn to use a new system. One of the features of this new system allows customers to request a callback and dials customers automatically to reduce the need for them to wait in a queue. This has been useful during particularly busy periods, e.g., Annual Billing, Elections.

4.4 Our online appointment system, introduced in late 2021, continues to be a work in progress. Customers can utilise this to book appointments, see Taxi Licensing Officers, complete Land Searches and book an appointment to view the Electoral Register or see one of their Team. Our colleagues in Housing Options and the Lifeline Team utilise the back end of the system to manage their appointments. Environmental Health are keen to make use of the system and this will be discussed with them to see how their needs can be met.

4.5 We continue to encourage all our customers to use different channels to contact us and we continue to work closely with back-office teams, to consider new ways of working to deliver a seamless service to our customers. Our colleagues in the Planning Department have a website which customers can access and sign up to receive notifications on planning applications within a set radius. This

reduces the need for customers to call in to access this information. The Customer Services Team actively promote this to our customers.

- 4.6 Our webchat channel has had another successful year, which has seen an Increase of 3,005 webchat interactions taking our total for the year to 6,737. These are a mixture of Live Agent chats and our 'Knowledge Bot'. Our knowledge bot is managed, developed, and updated in house, by ourselves, Making it easy to monitor response accuracy and make quick amendments. We currently offer advice for 11 service areas via this platform, managed and developed in house, allowing us to amend promptly and test for accuracy. The knowledge bot accuracy remains high at 63% although this is a slight dip from last year. With almost twice the number of chats there is more room for error and we continue to work on developing the accuracy.

Our website continues to be the preferred method for our customers to obtain Council information. The figures show an increase of approx. 39%. The highest increase is for Revenues, with 62,623 more clicks.

The Team handles incoming emails for Env Health, Cleansing, Info and Public Health. We aim to respond to these within 24 hours, Monday to Friday. In 2022/23 the Team handled 4,347 emails. This is a reduction of 18% on the previous year. There was a small increase in customers utilising Facebook, and online portals for Environmental Health issues. Appendix 3 – provides further information,

- 4.7 Telephone calls handled by the Team for this year totalled 119,422. This is a 17% decrease from the previous year. We have seen a 17% decrease over the past 2 years. This reduction is likely due to customers utilising our Webchat service, online e-forms and our website, as we see an increase in the numbers of customers using our webpages. See Appendices 4 and 5.
- 4.8 Despite call volumes for Council Tax and Business Rates continuing to be the busiest, we have again seen a decrease, 10% for this year, a total of 35,572 calls handled by the Team. During this period, we have had a lack of skilled staff for this service area and customers have become more confident utilising self-serve options on the website and using our Webchat service to resolve their queries. 2,417 calls were regarding Energy Rebate, 1,800 were in relation to receiving a Reminder, Final Notice, or Summons for payment, and 726 calls were regarding refunds. Annual Billing continues to have significant impact on incoming call volumes, often reaching 1000+ calls a day.

We have noticed a decrease in our Benefit call volumes from the previous year. The Team handled a total of 6,318 calls from 10,190 the previous year, a reduction of 3,872 calls. This reduction is likely to be due to more customers being moved across to Universal Credit which is administered by DWP.

- 4.9 Customer Services have provided support for our customers who 'come in', both at the Civic centre and Bognor Regis Town Hall (BRTTH), resolving enquiries where possible or signposting to services offered via our online or telephone service.
- Civic Centre footfall for the year was 9,687 and BRTTH saw 8,229 customers face to face. This is a significant decrease from pre pandemic levels. We were unable to report during 20/21 and 21/22 as we had no data system available and initially were not seeing customers during lockdown. As you can see customer footfall has decreased by 53% overall since pre pandemic. Customers were encouraged to access our services differently and this practice has become 'normal' allowing us to focus our attention on those that need our assistance the most. Appendix 2 – provides further information.
- 4.10 In the five years between 2018-2023, customer services have dealt with 867,904 enquiries across telephone and face to face interactions. Website and Webchat statistics indicate an increase in customers accessing our services via alternative channels.
- Appendix 3 and 5 – provides further information.
- 4.11 Since November 2022, Customer Services Team have been utilising 0830 - 1100 every Wednesday to complete Staff Training. This has allowed the Team to train together, ensure processes are updated and understood for the benefit of the customer and enables mandatory training to be completed within set guidelines and timescales. We have also taken the opportunity during this time, for advisors to spend time with colleagues in the service areas we handle enquiries for, to have a better understanding of the service which in turn provides the customer with valued understanding and assistance when dealing with their enquiry.
- 4.12 October 2022 saw the need to introduce a Security presence at the reception areas at both BRTTH and the Civic Centre. This was due to an incident with a member of the public and more frequent issues with staff having to handle challenging customer behaviour at first point of contact.
- Security are available during building opening hours (0900-1600) and are acting as a triage service to ensure the safety of the staff, customers and the building and this has been a success since its implementation. We are now in the process of working to procure this service on a permanent basis.
- Up to March 2023, Security handled 2,226 customers across both sites. Initially they had no access to our IT systems to record customer interactions, so this total is not a true reflection of the exact numbers. 2023/24 already shows an increase in this number.
- 4.13 **Going Forward**
- Customer Service Strategy remains a high priority for us as a Team. We have completed workshops with some of the back offices to assist with providing customers a more seamless customer journey and we are keen to continue with this approach. We also enjoy being part of the Corporate Induction to ensure Customer Service reaches all new staff.
- We will continue to provide customers who need our assistance via all channels with a consistent end to end service wherever possible. We will continue to

utilise Staff Training opportunities to review processes and look for ideas to improve service delivery. We still have some members of the Team who have not yet completed their training. We aim to be a fully skilled Team before the end of the 2023. We will lose 2 valuable Team members before 31 March 2024, to retirement. We have some ideas around the accommodation review which we hope to be able to share in the future. As the work develops looking at our future accommodation needs, customer services will play an important part in shaping the development of ideas.

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 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

8. RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

8.1 No matters arising

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

9.1 There are no direct legal implications associated with this report.

10. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT

10.1 No matters arising

11. HEALTH & SAFETY IMPACT

11.1 No matters arising

12. PROPERTY & ESTATES IMPACT

12.1 No matters arising

13.EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA) / SOCIAL VALUE

13.1 No matters arising

14.CLIMATE CHANGE & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT/SOCIAL VALUE

14.1 No matters arising

15.CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT

15.1 No matters arising

16.HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT

16.1 No matters arising

17.FREEDOM OF INFORMATION / DATA PROTECTION CONSIDERATIONS

17.1 None

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

None.