

# Arun District Council

<b>REPORT TO:</b>	<b>Corporate Support Committee 10 October 2024</b>
<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>Customer Services Annual Update – 2023/24</b>
<b>LEAD OFFICER:</b>	<b>Antony Baden Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer</b>
<b>LEAD MEMBER:</b>	<i>Councillor Francis Oppler, Chair of Corporate Support Committee</i>
<b>WARDS:</b>	<b>All</b>
<b>CORPORATE PRIORITY / POLICY CONTEXT / CORPORATE VISION:</b> Arun Direct, the Customer Services team, supports most Council service areas and priorities	
<b>DIRECTORATE POLICY CONTEXT:</b> Customer Service Strategy: Aiming to be a customer focused organisation. Working to understand our customers better and put them at the heart of everything we do and support customers to do more for themselves.	
<b>FINANCIAL SUMMARY:</b> The report is a performance report and does not have any direct financial implications.	

## 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides members with an overview of the Customer Services team's performance in 2023/24. It specifically considers the operation of the services and identifies emerging operational trends compared to the previous 3-5 years.
- 1.2 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. This year some information around our outreach work has been supplied.

## 2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 Corporate Support Committee is asked to consider the report and provide any observations to officers.

## 3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 3.1 The Arun Direct Team sits within the Finance Group and delivers a personalised service to our community on 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, for the 2023/24 financial year.

#### 4. **DETAIL**

4.1 Arun Direct responds to telephone enquiries made to the Council and has become a focal point for our customers since 2006. 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. We have since created and implemented our webchat facility which is available 24/7 and continues to provide an invaluable service to our customers. More recently, the Team has expanded its service by taking it directly into the community, visiting community hubs and veteran breakfast venues.

4.2 Switchboard is a 'signposting' service which directs external calls to the organisation. 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

4.3 The new telephony system introduced on 28 February 2023 continues to provide an excellent resource. One of the features of this system allows customers to request a callback and dials customers automatically to reduce the need for them to wait in a queue. This is particularly useful during busy periods, e.g. Annual Billing, Elections.

4.4 Our online appointment system, introduced in late 2021, provides further useful functionality. Customers can utilise this to book appointments, see Taxi Licensing Officers, complete Land Searches and book an appointment to view the Electoral Register or visit someone from that team. Our colleagues in Housing Options and the Lifeline Team utilise the system to manage their appointments. Environmental Health are also working with us and the supplier to create an appointment system for their noise equipment collection and return.

4.5 Our webchat channel has had another successful year and seen a 5% increase in webchat interactions, taking the total for the year to 7,059. These are a mixture of 'Live Agent' chats and accessing our 'Knowledge Bot'. The Knowledge Bot was developed, and is managed, in house. We currently offer advice for 11 service areas via this platform. The knowledge bot accuracy has dipped to 55% this year from 63% last year mainly because the nature of the queries received vary so greatly. Customers choosing to use webchat for Out Of Hours (OOH) queries has reduced and we are seeing a trend for 'Live Chat'. Our website continues to be the

preferred method for our customers to obtain Council information. Further explanation regarding this statistic is shown in Appendices 1a and 1b.

- 4.6 The Team handles incoming emails for Environmental Health, Cleansing and Public Health services. We aim to respond to these within 24 hours, Monday to Friday. This year the team handled 5,160 emails, which was an increase of 16% on the previous year. Emails relating to Cleansing emails nearly doubled from 2,158 to 4,146, (a 48% increase), mainly due to a change in Cleansing procedures.
- 4.7 Customers using Facebook to make contact, remains low and we've seen a significant increase (34%) in customers logging their own Environmental Health enquiries via the online Portal. Appendix 2 provides further information.
- 4.8 Telephone calls handled by the Team for the year totalled 118,239. We continue to see a decrease in call volumes over the past 2 years probably due to customers using our Webchat service, online e-forms and the website.
- 4.9 Call volumes for Council Tax and Business Rates remain the busiest and we have seen an increase of 7% for this year - a total of 38,207 calls handled by the Team. Annual billing has a significant impact on incoming call volumes, often reaching 1,000+ calls a day.
- 4.10 Switchboard enquiries, our signposting service, have decreased but is still the 2<sup>nd</sup> busiest call queue. This is probably because customers access services via service area direct dial lines and direct dial numbers.
- 4.11 We also experienced higher than expected call volumes for Housing Support. Customers were experiencing difficulties on transfer to a particular area of Housing, which resulted in repeat callers through this queue. Appendix 3 gives more detail on call volumes across all Council service areas.
- 4.12 The team continue to support our customers who visit us at both sites, resolving enquiries at first point of contact wherever possible or signposting them to services offered via telephone, online or external partners e.g. WSCC. Footfall for the Civic Centre was 7,977 and 6,035 for Bognor Regis Town Hall, which is a combined decrease across both sites of 22%. It's likely that this decrease shows customers choosing to access services via alternative channels available. In February 2024 we started to take our service out to the community. Appendix 4 shows further information on this topic.
- 4.13 Total number of telephone and face to face interactions over 5 years is 779,809, which is a reduction of 88,095 (10%), as outlined in Appendices 3 and 4.
- 4.14 Procurement for the Security contract was completed earlier this year and has been operational since the 1 April 2024. Performance information will be provided in the next annual report.
- 4.15 Training continues to be a high priority as we welcome new members to the Team and create a fully skilled Team for the benefit of our customers.

4.16 We always look for areas of improvement to processes and procedures for the benefit of the team and our customers. This year we will begin to look at ways we can gather relevant customer insight of our current service which will help us to make improvements or changes and potentially 'do things differently', thus providing an enhanced quality of service.

## **5. CONSULTATION**

5.1 None required – report is for information only.

## **6. OPTIONS / ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED**

6.1 None required – report is for information only.

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

7.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

## **8. RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS**

8.1 None required – report is for information only.

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

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

## **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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**CONTACT OFFICER:**

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**BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:**