

ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO AND DECISION OF COPORATE SUPPORT COMMITTEE ON 28 SEPTEMBER 2021

SUBJECT: Customer Services Annual Update – 2020/2021

REPORT AUTHOR: Lisa Emmens – Customer Services Manager

DATE: August 2021

EXTN: 37465

PORTFOLIO AREA: Neighbourhood Group, Customer Services

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report provides Members with a brief overview of Customer Services. It specifically considers the operation of the services over the last financial year ending March 2021 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 inquiries using the Council's website and webchat.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Committee is requested to:

- (1) Endorse the report acknowledging the work of the Customer Services Team and implementation of the digital improvements; and
- (2) To record its thanks to the Customer Services Team for ensuring that customers continued to receive a high level of service during the Pandemic.

1. BACKGROUND:

1.1 Arun District Council delivers a wide range of services, from waste and recycling collection impacting all resident, 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'.

1.2 Arun Direct (AD) was set up in 2006 to respond to the telephone inquiries made to the Council becoming a focal point for the customer. This began with the 2 services growing today to 10 services within Arun Direct and incorporating face to face enquiries both at Littlehampton and Bognor receptions; the service comes under the banner of Customer Services within the Neighbourhood Group.

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

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

1.4 Switchboard calls is a 'sign posting' service which directs external calls to the organisation. More in-depth enquiries are passed to the general enquiries line managed by AD.

2. COVID-19 Global Pandemic

2.1 In March 2020 due to the Pandemic we closed our face to face operation in line with Government Guidelines forcing all of us to work from home. Our telephony system had to be recalibrated to enable the team to work from home and initially there was a lot of work arounds , in order to handle telephone enquiries effectively and for almost 12 months we were unable to obtain system reporting, relying on the team to provide manual statistical information daily to the Management Team.

2.2 Since March 2020, most of our team have been working from home.

2.3 In August 2020 we introduced a system within our reception areas to respond to customers still attending the building and signpost our customers to use our alternative contact channels. With the exception of Homelessness customers who are seen by the Housing Team as a priority.

2.4 Our face to face customers have been required to use different channels to contact us and we worked closely with back office teams, for parking services, to put new ways of working in place in order to deliver a seamless service to our customers.

2.5 Our website is still the most preferred method for our customers to obtain Council information. The figures for our customers using the website during the pandemic remain steady, however there is a significant decrease in customers using our planning pages, due to the building trade being significantly impacted due to Covid.

2.6 We introduced webchat in August 2020. This provides another channel for our customers to contact us and provides auto answers outside office hours.

2.7 Tascomi, the Environmental Health Portal available on our website, has seen an increase in use during the past year. This system allows customers to log queries and questions directly on to the Environmental Health System.

2.8 We have seen an increase in customers contacting us via email and we deal with these emails within 24 hours Monday to Friday.

2.9 The majority of our customers who required parking permits and visitor books previously attended Bognor Town Hall and during the pandemic we changed the procedures, requiring customers to contact us via email or phone. The new process has worked successfully and will continue in the future.

2.10 We will continue to respond to our customer who contact us via telephone from home. A new appointment system is being implemented later this year to allow customers who need to access Council Services face to face. They will be able to make a timed appointment to visit our Council buildings, for some Services in a phased approach.

3. Review of Service

3.1 – Telephony

3.1.1 Customer Services dealt with 174,104 calls during 2020/2021. This is compared to 154,458 calls during 2019/2020, however in 2019/2020 up to 22 March we also dealt with 55,594 customers face to face.

3.1.2 During 2020/21 we also dealt with 6723 emails, 3799 webchats from implementation date of August 2020. This is compared to 3838 emails in 2019/2020.

3.1.3 This demonstrates customers are contacting us using different channels

3.1.4 Our volumes for Council Tax and Business rates have seen a significant increase in 2020/21, along with Benefits, Housing Support and Car Parks. Whereas significant decreases are seen in Planning, Building Control and Elections.

3.1.5 Annual billing – March each year Revenues team send out 80,000 Council Tax bills and this has a significant increase on call volumes during the month, with volumes reaching 1000 calls a day at times.

3.1.6 Local Elections and any General Election has seen an increase in call volumes, with the telephony team working the same hours as the opening times of the polling stations to give additional support to our presiding officers and poll clerks.

Appendix 1 - provides further information

3.2 - Come in

3.2.1 Customer Services have provided support for our customers who come in, both at the Civic Centre and Bognor Town Hall.

3.2.2 Previously Civic Centre customers visited the Main Reception for all General Enquiries and Appointments. We also operated a separate Housing Support Desk to support Housing related customers

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

3.2.4 Due to the Pandemic all our customers are have been dealt with via telephone, email, or webchat. Housing continued to see customers who are homeless face to face.

Appendix 2 - provides further information

3.3 - Website

3.3.1 The Website continues to support our other methods of contact. There has been a change in usage over the past year, with a decrease in our Planning customers using our website and an increase in our Council Tax and Business Rates customers using this method of contact.

3.3.2 The sharp increase is due to our customers seeking information and support for various grants the Council has provided during the Pandemic, for example Business Grants.

3.3.3 A new style website has been introduced in July 2021 and Customer Services has been integral to assisting with the layout of the website for ease of customers use.

Appendix 4 - provides further information

3.4 - Webchat and Emails

We have also implemented a new webchat service and continue to support customers via our e-mail service to allow customers to seek support through alternative methods. In 2020/2021 we supported 6,723 customers via E-mail & the Environmental Health Tascomi Portal and an additional 3,799 via our Webchat.

Appendix 3 - provides further information

3.5 - Overall

In five years from 2016-2021 customer services have deal with 1,018,259 customers both coming in to talk to us and via the telephone.

Appendix 5 - provides further information

4.0 - Customer Services Strategy

4.1 Before the pandemic, we had started to work on the Customer Service Strategy. We held a very successful workshop in November 2019 where our team came up with some great ideas, some of which we were able to implement as immediate changes to our procedures.

4.2 Our Customer Service Strategy was adopted by Cabinet earlier this year, this includes a new customer charter, where customers can clearly see what they can expect from us as a council and in return what we expect from them.

4.3 Since the adoption of the Strategy we have made it available on our website for our customers, we have also set to work on promoting it throughout the business.

4.4 A couple of small Teams have been set up to look at this feedback and create bitesize workshops tailor made and service area specific. We hope these workshops will assist in improving the customer journey and the business working together as a whole for the same goal.

2. PROPOSAL(S):

The Corporate Support Committee and being asked to note this report.

3. OPTIONS:

The Corporate Support Committee and being asked to note this report.

4. CONSULTATION:

Has consultation been undertaken with:	YES	NO
Relevant Town/Parish Council		No
Relevant District Ward Councillors		No
Other groups/persons (please specify)		
5. ARE THERE ANY IMPLICATIONS IN RELATION TO THE FOLLOWING COUNCIL POLICIES: (Explain in more detail at 6 below)	YES	NO
Financial		No
Legal		No
Human Rights/Equality Impact Assessment		No
Community Safety including Section 17 of Crime & Disorder Act		No
Sustainability		No
Asset Management/Property/Land		No
Technology		No

Other (please explain)		No
6. IMPLICATIONS: None		

7. REASON FOR THE DECISION:
The Corporate Support Committee is asked to note this report.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS:
Arun District Council Customer Services Strategy 2021-26