

Scrutiny Group Report on Sandwell Council's Pilot Housing Hub & Contact Centre

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group (TLSG) wanted to test and scrutinise the customer experience of accessing the housing service via the telephone.
- 1.2 They wanted to ensure the ease of navigation and to get through to the call centre irrespective of disability, language barriers, or accessibility issues.
- 1.3 They wanted to ensure the service resolved housing queries for tenants in a timely, sensitive and professional manner.

2. Background & Context

- 2.1 The telephone service is delivered in 2 ways. The corporate call centre deals with all council enquiries including those relating to the housing service. In October 2021 a Housing Hub pilot was established so housing enquiries could be dealt with at the first point of contact.
- 2.2 The Housing Hub deals with around 15% of general housing calls and operates daily between 9 am and 1 pm Monday- Friday. It does not cover Repairs enquiries, these are still being dealt with by the corporate call centre.
- 2.3 The TLSG felt the pilot provided an opportunity to examine a new service which aimed to improve call times and provide a right-first-time service. Right first time aims, where possible, to resolve all the customer queries in one interaction.

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3. Methodology

The group chose a variety of methods to test and scrutinise the service including.

- 3.1 Mystery Shopping – members of the group agreed to test the two main published numbers for the service of 569-6000 and 368-1166. Seven scrutiny group members called the service numbers and were tasked with listening for instructions on specific elements of the service e.g. finding a home, anti-social behaviour, domestic violence etc. The calls were made during office hours and at different times from 6th- 14th June 2022. The group were recording their observations, opinions and suggestions on a pre-agreed form to see how the service works in practice for customers.
- 3.2 Staff Interviews – The group constructed a questionnaire and then used it to interview the Housing Hub Supervisor and a Manager to establish how the pilot is measuring success, how it deals with complaints and how it is being reviewed
- 3.3 Desk Top Evidence – the group received a detailed presentation on the service, how it is delivered and how it is measured and monitored. They then requested key documents and evidence to enable them to assess and evaluate the service.

This included:

- The rationale for establishing the pilot
- The cost of the pilot
- The measures used to test customer satisfaction and right first time
- Service improvements because of the pilot

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4 Findings

4.1 Mystery Shopping

- a) The group rang both numbers available to tenants to access the housing service – 569 6000 and 368 1166.
- b) The findings for the 569 6000 number were that the answer message and repair options were clear and understandable. However, half the group did not manage to note down the number to ring for all other housing enquiries.
- c) The findings for the 368 1166 number were that the range of options was satisfactory and clear to understand, although there wasn't 'another' option for all other enquiries. There was a mixed view on whether the waiting time for the option was reasonable, for example, the Domestic Violence option explanation went on for far too long. The tenancy Advice option was quite confusing with lots of options that were repeated in different wording.
- d) The group identified findings that related to both numbers. There was no option/s/information to support residents with language barriers, partially deaf or other. The present system does not offer an option to speak to a person.

4.2 Interviewing Staff

- a) Existing Housing Neighbourhood Management Staff are only working for the pilot between 9 am -1 pm Monday to Friday. For the rest of the day, these staffs are conducting other Housing work. Information provided from managers is that these staff are all experienced front-line housing staff that have the knowledge of dealing with customers. All calls are dealt with by a named officer who will follow through with the query until it has been resolved or referred to the appropriate department.
For the other part of the day, all Housing Neighbourhood calls are routed back to the Corporate call centre for the councils, who also deal with all the repairs calls throughout the day, with no experience with the Housing Neighbourhood Management calls.

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- b) There is no quantifiable external evidence of measuring the success of calls, such as any surveys carried out to customers on the pilot service. There is some anecdotal evidence from staff that customers seem satisfied as they have told staff that they are happy that they can speak to a named housing officer who has the knowledge to deal with their enquiries or can pass them onto someone that can help.
- c) Anecdotal evidence from the supervisor and Manager suggests that Staff seem to enjoy working on this pilot and get a lot of job satisfaction in this work. But, once again, no staff surveys have been carried out to back this up.

4.3 Desktop Evidence Review

- a) The rationale for Pilot Inception

The group wanted to review evidence which demonstrated the rationale for the development of the Housing Hub Pilot. The following statement was provided

'We analysed one week of housing enquiries (282) received by the corporate contact centre. We found they were only able to resolve 13 of these enquiries (9.3%) and believed that if these calls had been answered by a team of housing experts e.g. the Housing Hub, they would have been able to resolve 140 (49.7%). The Housing Hub is not designed to resolve all the calls received

The TLSG was informed that the rationale for the Pilot was to deal with simple calls. More complex calls will still need intervention from the local area officers, and some specialist calls will still be needed to be handed over to a specialist team '

- b) Cost of the Pilot & Roll-Out

The group requested information on the cost of the pilot. Unfortunately, there are no figures given on the total cost of the pilot. The only information given was that staff numbers working on the pilot is 12, and, if the Pilot was rolling out as a service, that staff numbers would be doubled. TLSG was informed that there would be

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other costs that would need to be taken on, such as equipment, that have not been worked out.

c) Customer Satisfaction 'Right First Time'

The group wanted to examine the information around customer satisfaction and the right-first-time concept. At present, there has been no Customer Satisfaction surveys carried out from the start of the pilot in October 2021. The council have procured a software solution to support gathering customer satisfaction called Snap Survey, which is managed and held in a section of housing. Once this section gives the staff access and training to use the software, customer surveys for the Pilot Contact Centre Housing Hub will be carried out. There are other tools to aid the measurement of benchmarking such as Callcentrehelper.com, but, to date, no evidence on this has been supplied.

d) Improvements in the Service

The group wanted to examine evidence that showed improvements to the service because of the Pilot Statistical figures were provided for the period 1st October 2021 – 31st May 2022 demonstrate that:

Corporate calls - Analysing all the figures given, it seems that overall corporates call is being answered at a quicker rate, with the abandonment level of calls reducing, as well as waiting times coming down.

Pilot Housing Hub Contact calls – an average of 14% of the total calls made from the corporate centre have been dealt with by the Pilot, with the abandonment rate reduced.

Information provided by a Housing Manager:

The average call length for the Housing Hub in May was 9.5 minutes. We expect our calls to last longer than those to repairs as we are trying to resolve the enquiry at the first point of contact, but we do not envisage significantly long call durations – enquiries that require a significant amount of time are most likely to be complex cases that need intervention from the local or specialist team. E.g. Housing Hub officers would offer general advice around emergency support in domestic abuse cases but would refer the case for the local officer to

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undertake the intensive work such as finding alternative accommodation etc.

5.1 Mystery shopper – Grp telephone exercise

Conclusions

- a) As there are 2 telephone numbers to deal with Housing queries it becomes a little confusing. Most people are aware of the 569-6000, as this number has been used the longest, the second number is a number that many tenants are aware of, which is the number 368-1166, of the Pilot Housing Hub centre calls.
- b) There will always be other enquiries that don't fall into the options listed, and, as there is no option, for 'any other queries' many customers will not want on the line either for a long time, which can be costly, or decide to hang up, with the problem unresolved. Some who are more vulnerable might get stressed and anxious.
- c) The fact that there is no option to speak to 'a person' who cannot choose one of the options, will leave customers frustrated.
- d) The recorded option message suggests you go to the councils' online service MySandwell as an option. It doesn't explain that, to do this, you need that you need a valid email to register.
- e) Calls can be expensive – Housing informed the group that most calls are at a local rate, but some packages can charge. One of the longest calls waiting times was 54 minutes which to someone's personal phone contract could equate to: BT £10.80, EE £18.90 for 54 minutes
- f) There is a problem in that this pilot does not look at the other part of housing calls, namely Housing repairs, and repairs will continue to be dealt with the corporate call centre, where a cost to the Housing department is still needed to be paid into. There does need to be some exploration as to whether Housing, comes together as one department, as on 'one service'.

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5.2 Staff Interviews

Conclusions

- 1)
 - a) There is no proper customer satisfaction evidence or measurement that customers are receiving a good quality of service.
 - b) There is no proper staff satisfaction evidence or measurement that staff are receiving job satisfaction, therefore, it is not possible to conclude that this is the case.
 - c) It is disappointing that there are only some anecdotal positive comments from both staff and tenants to prove some satisfaction that cannot be viewed as robust evidence.
- 2) Staff Training slides were the only evidence of staff training, which concentrated only on the processes that need to be adopted, but no materials to the training about the use of interpersonal skills and customer service.
- 3) There was no information about any provision for customers who might need extra support.
- 4) No information was mentioned about any concerns about data protection if using family and friends to support the customer.
- 5) There was concern about how to update the information that staff have on the customers' personal information, e.g., support links, family and friends' contact details.

5.3 Desktop Evidence

Conclusions

- 1) Rationale – It seems that we have received little evidence around statistics, and customer satisfaction surveys and where there is some evidence, such as a week's data of analysis prior to the start of the pilot in October 2021, it is subjective in terms of saying 'we believe,' with no hard-objective evidence to back it up. This makes it difficult for the group to have a view on whether the justification for the pilot was robust enough.

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Initially we were informed that the Pilot was to deal with most Housing issues, as a 'one point of contact'. Recently information given suggests it is for simpler housing issues. There does need to be some clarity on the exact nature of this potential service so that customers are clear about what can be expected.

2) Cost of service – There was limited information given on current pilot costs and estimated costs for the roll-out. This makes it difficult to understand the financial implications., and, therefore TLSG is not able to pass any comments in this area.

3) Customer Satisfaction – Right First Time

Tools have been purchased as aids to measure Customer Satisfaction, but there is a delay in gathering this evidence, due to some practical issues, such as waiting for the packages to be shared with staff to carry out the surveys.

It has been nearly 10 months, from the start of the pilot, where there has been an opportunity missed to really showcase any evidence to substantiate the pilot.

It would have been useful to see how the department has used Callcentrehelper.com as a benchmarking tool, but to date has not been informed about the use.

4) Improvements in Service

It has been difficult to reach any conclusion on, whether this pilot has made a positive difference to customers receiving a better and quicker service, as there have been no Customer Satisfaction Surveys carried out to date. There is some evidence that does show some improvement in reduced waiting times, and some anecdotal evidence, that services are better for customers.

Therefore, it is difficult to make any judgement on how well the service has improved.

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6.1 Mystery shopper – Grp telephone exercise

Recommendations

1)

There are 2 ways around the confusion with numbers which are either

- a) 2 choices to deal with confusion: either: advertise only one of the 2 numbers, and once you get through, then split the call to either the choice to 569-6000 to 368-1166 OR Advertise both numbers well – efficiently and extensively.
- b) Whichever of choice in the above, – advertising all Council numbers via Sandwell Herald – with a handy cut-out advertising new numbers of all Council services or producing a Fridge magnet to stick on Fridge for all essential Council numbers.
- c) Create another option on the options for all other Housing queries so that customers are to speak to an officer to be directed to the appropriate place.
- d) If possible, in terms of the cost, offer a call-back facility for more vulnerable tenants.
- e) Add into the message about the MySandwell option, the information about requiring a valid email address to register for an account.
- f) Explore the option of bringing the Housing Management telephone Queries and the Repairs queries to look at a co-ordinated approach to Housing, as well as a cost-benefit analysis, as to saving money by not paying into the corporate call centre service.

6.2 Staff Interviews

Recommendations

- 1) Gather evidence of satisfaction levels – the quality of service
- 2) Staff, managers, and all departments involved need to come together and be aware of this area of work – of the scrutinising of the Pilot Contact Centre Housing Hub and coordinate robust, understandable evidence and measurements.

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- 3) Explore the opportunity for SMBC to add a translator for all common languages in MySandwell. There is the facility to do this through Translator Broker.
Sandwell MBC to provide a secure translator service that can translate back into English
- 4) Sandwell Council to check the policy on keeping data and ensuring it is updated.

6.3 Desktop Evidence

Recommendations – Oct 21

1) Rationale

More Robust quantifiable information needs to be provided to support the justification of a roll-out of this service.

2) Cost of the Service

To make any judgement on both the pilot and the potential roll-out, a desktop costing exercise needs to be undertaken and analysed. At this point, some conclusions on the costings can be drawn up to access whether to continue with the pilot for more evidence or to proceed with the roll-out of the service.

3) Customer Satisfaction 'Right First Time'

Once again, some robust evidence via Customer Satisfaction Surveys needs to be undertaken as soon as possible to support the justification of this service.

4) Improvements in the Service

As stated previous, gather robust evidence to demonstrate that services have improved before making any decision on the roll-out.

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Scrutiny Group Questionnaire for meeting with Housing Hub Customer Service Officer and other staff

Duration of Interview: 1 hour

Date of Interview: Tuesday 12th July 1-4pm

Scrutiny Members interviewing: Apologies from Shefa

Support Officer: Marianne Monro

Interviewees: Jas Bangor and Tom Hogan

- 1) Are you responsible for managing/supervising the Assistant Customer Services Officer Housing Staff? YES/NO

Yes, 2 Customer Services Officers share the role on top of our other Job roles of Housing Officers.

If No, who is responsible for them?

- 2) Can you explain the difference in roles of the Assistant Customer Service Officer (ACSO) and the Customer Services Officers (CSO)?

The CSO's Supervise and manage the ACSO when they are on duty in the mornings from 9-1pm. We are all then managed by substantive managers for our other work.

- 3) How do you measure the quality of calls?

At present we do not measure the quality of calls

- 4) a) Do you have any quality standard measurements for calls, and, if so what are they?

b) How often do you check calls?

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We do not check calls as such but are in constantly in contact with the VASCO to see if they have any issues.

c) What do those measurements show?

We have anecdotal evidence that customers are generally happy, as to how they are dealt with as we will deal with them enquires straight away, either by answering them quickly, or asking them to hold for a short while we get the answer. We do not allow the customer to wait if we can't answer. We will take their number and ring them back on that day with the answer. They will be called back by the same officer that dealt with them initially. Customers are happy that there is generally someone who is named that will see the query all the way through to resolution.

Once we get the survey package for measuring Customers satisfaction, we will use it. We will be doing a similar thing for our staff.

Staff have reported that they are satisfied with this type of work as they are seeing through the queries, generally from start to finish, and are getting job satisfaction from this role.

4) Can you give us some examples of any practices that have changed because of checking how staff deal with the calls?

Our practices have not changed. What has changed is that we are constantly receiving updates of information on service change that we use to ensure the customers are given accurate information.

6)a) Do you have any figures/percentages of calls that staff have referred to other departments/sections?

No figures/data

b) Where have you referred people to?

Most common referral are for departments with things such as, planning applications, bin information, hardly any for external agencies.

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c) How have people been referred e.g. given an email/website/telephone number?

Customers are given choices, as to what works best for them of websites/emails/telephone numbers

7) a) Do you carry out regular staff training, sessions, and, how often?

b) What is the focus of the training?

All staff starting on the pilot had initial training

c) Is it reviewed, and the frequency?

They are all updated with any regular housing/council information that helps them do their job with accuracy. E.g. changes in the Homelessness Process/contacts

8) What provision, or actions do you take, if you have tenants and residents who's:

As staff are speaking to the tenant, they will call up their tenancy details that will show all their personal information to support them in understanding their needs. Normally people who ring up are existing tenants

a) English is not their first language

If they ring up, they have already sorted out a family member/friend who can speak on their behalf.

b) Have a hearing impairment

We will normally have their impairment details to be able to deal with them

c) Have a learning disability, memory or understanding information impairment?

We will normally have their impairment details to be able to deal with them

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9) Do you have any additional comments/thoughts/ideas that you would like to add:

All staff working on the pilot are experienced Housing Officer (Supervisors) or Assistant Housing Officers that have worked on the front-line receptions that are familiar with enquires, and where to go to get information. We have an 'open housing' System application that allows them to message other expert staff to get answers while on the calls.

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Summary of Feedback from Housing Group Telephone Calls Made by TLS Group members

Purpose:

The group wanted to check through their own research to look out how tenants and leaseholders would manage the call answer machine service for Repairs and any other Housing Management query by using both the 569-6000 Repairs number and the 368- 1166 Housing & Neighbourhoods other number.

Methodology

It was agreed for all members to ring the Repairs general 569-600 number, but to allocate the 5 service areas options between all the group so that all options were listened to together so that they could be evaluated.

The 5 areas were:

Option 1 -Finding a new Home

Option 2 - Advice & Assistance on Tenancy

Option 3 -Easy ways to pay rent & Leaseholder Charge

Option 4 -Anti-social behaviour

Option 5 -Help with Domestic Violence

All calls were rung between the hours of 9-1pm where the Housing Hub Pilot contact centre was used. The call was rung on different days between Monday 6th – Tuesday 14th June 2022.

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Findings

Repair Line -569-6000

Most of the group thought the answer message was clear and understandable.

A number was offered for all other housing enquiries where, just over 50% managed to make a note of the other number.

Most understood the options given for repairs.

Is it still necessary to cover the Corvid message, when it is no longer law to report?

All other Housing Queries – 368-1166

All options were clear to understand

Most people thought the options offered were satisfactory.

There was a mixed view on whether the waiting time for the option was reasonable. On the Domestic Violence option, it was felt that the definition of Domestic Violence was far too long.

The tenancy Advice option was quite confusing with lots of options that were repeated in a different wording, that could confuse people,.

Findings to both lines

There were no options about other language facilities, so a person whose first language isn't English would struggle.

The present system does not offer an option to speak to a person.

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Recommendations for Repairs Line 569-6000

- To offer an emergency repairs number with the times the service is available
- To offer another option 'for any other query press option?
- To add on where the message asks you to register My Sandwell account, that you need to have a valid email address. Also, the possibility of having a short u tube video proceed to explain how to register and use initially use MySandwell.
- To repeat the other Housing Service number of 368- 1166 so the caller can make a note of it and offer a facility to press another number to directly be transferred, as opposed to hang up and re-dial.

Recommendations for other Housing Service Line of 368-1166

- To offer another option for Domestic Violence to signposting people to Women's Aid, maybe through pressing another button to get through directly.
- A facility to put you through to an operator to assist you would help people whose English is not their first language, people with learning disabilities, dementia and other disabilities.
- There does need to be an option to speak to an operator, as opposed to only offering the MySandwell website, that leaves people stuck with nowhere to go to resolve their issue.
- To send a text message for Direct Debit payments after calling, as well as ensuring that people know they need their rent account number, explaining what that is and where to find it.
- To review all the options, that have other options within the, to check whether there are ways to amalgamate some, as it is quite a lot for someone to take them all in, remember and know that you need to choose one.
- To shorten the initial messages, given before you get into the options, for example, what is acceptable/unacceptable behaviour. This is too long, especially if people are limited with time, with paying for calls and who have a small concentration span.