

Report to: **Resources Scrutiny Committee**
Date: **8 January, 2008**
Report of: **Head of Customer Services**
Subject: **Customer Services Centre Update**
Ward: **All**

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The report seeks to update Resources Scrutiny Committee on the progress and performance of the Customer Services Centre.

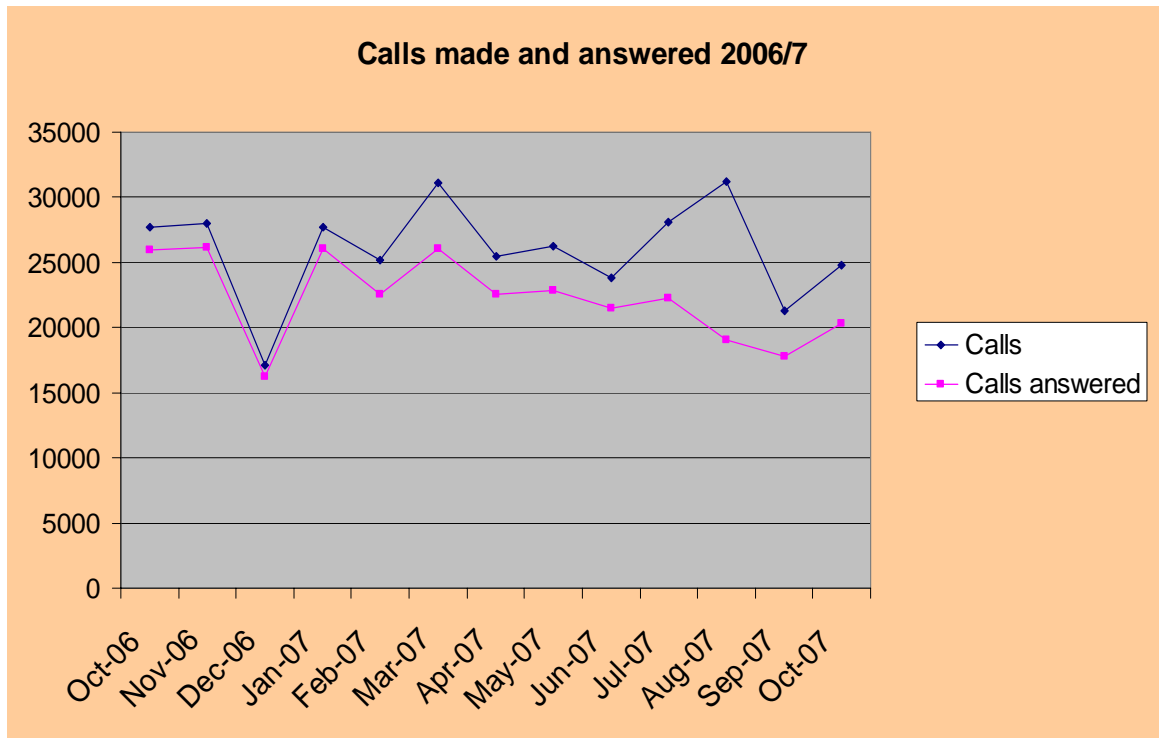
2. Consultation

- 2.1 In preparing this report consultation has taken place with the Executive Member for Customer Services, Head of e-Government & IS and John Wilkes, Consultant with CCP Ltd.

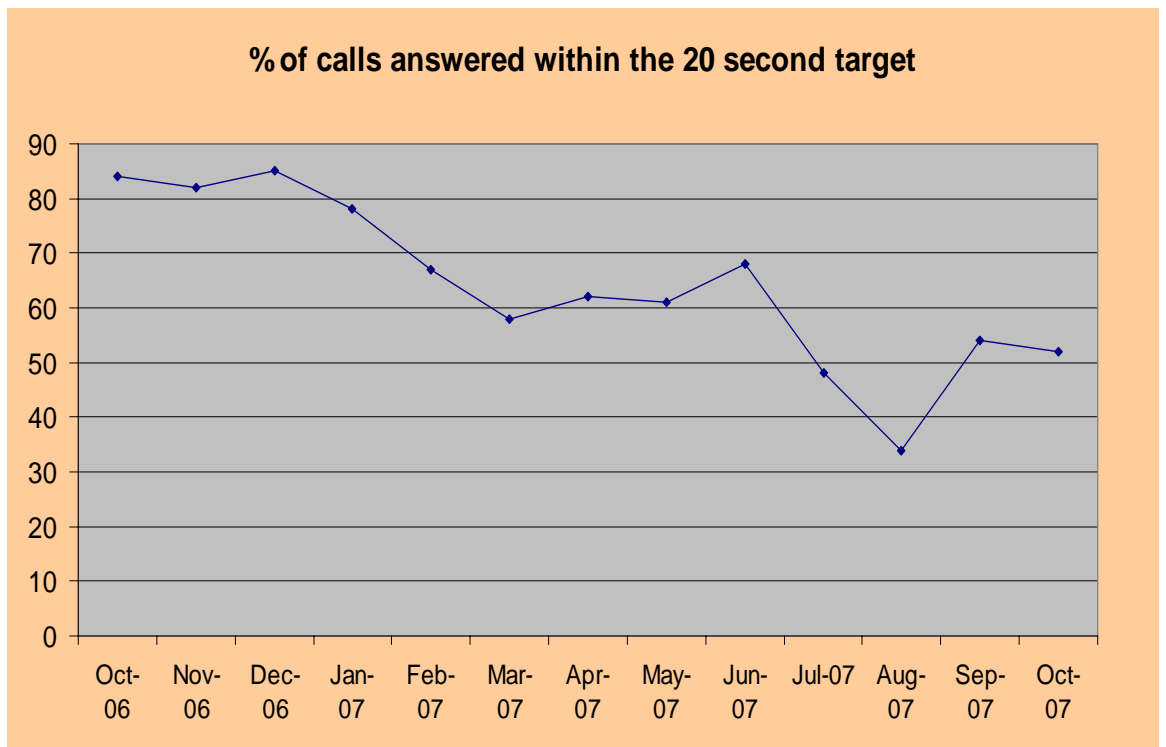
3. Background

- 3.1 The Customer Services Centre has been operational since December 2005 and in March 2006 the old switchboard and customer service teams were merged and all staff were trained to handle both types of calls.
- 3.2 Following further training the first phase of Council Tax, Planning & Development Control, Environmental Services and Asset & Property Management calls were migrated into the Customer Services Centre during 2007. All CSA's can now handle information requests and give advice on these subjects, as well as taking credit & debit card payments, sending out relevant forms and completing requests for service for a number of services e.g. bin deliveries, bin removals, missed bin collections, bin repairs and assisted pull-outs.
- 3.3 The Customer Service Advisors also cover the reception area of Building 9 which is now the main reception area for customers on the site.
- 3.4 During the summer of 2007 (August and early September in particular) the CSC was under a lot of pressure from the volumes of calls. Indeed, the number of calls offered in August was higher than in March, when the annual Council Tax bills were sent out. Coupled with the very high volume of calls during this period was a mixture of staff holidays (as expected during the school summer holidays) and a higher than usual amount of sickness. The following charts show the performance of the CSC since October 2006.

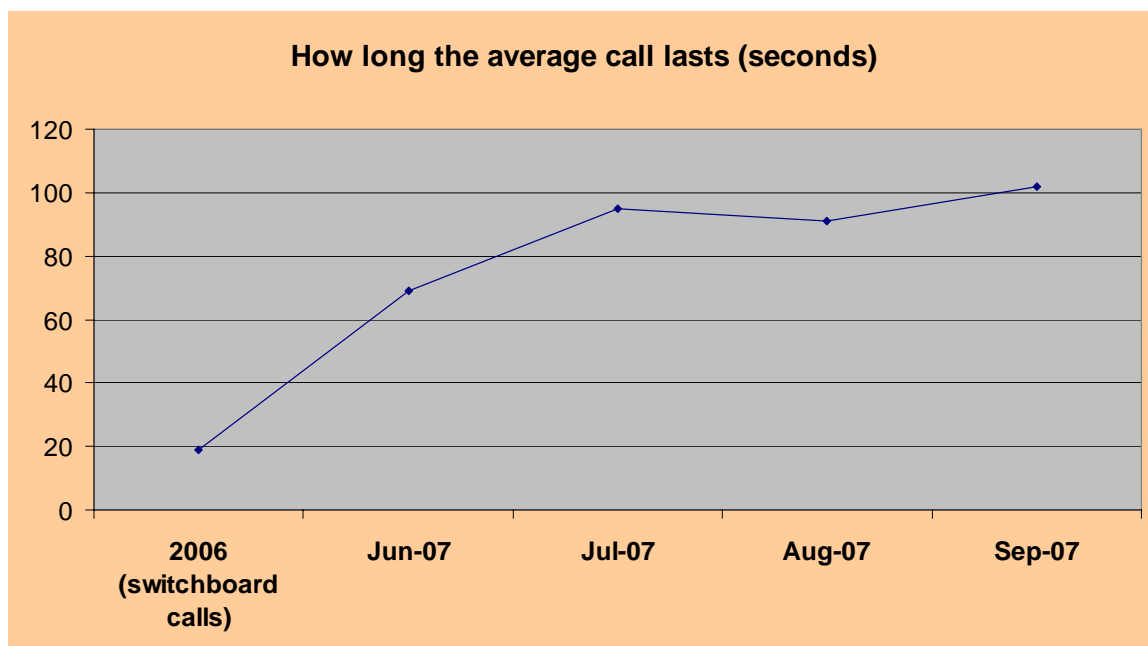
3.5



3.6



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3.8 As well as the information in the charts above, approximately 8% of the CSC's daily calls are calls relating to East Durham Homes. Handling these calls during the summer period prevented CSA's from answering calls from customers of the Council and contributed to the longer waiting times/queues and numbers of calls which abandoned.

3.9 Another contributing factor was the number of calls from business contacts, officers in other authorities, colleagues and family members. These calls accounted for approximately 20 to 25% of the CSC's daily calls (based on a survey of calls undertaken in May 2007).

3.10 Other issues which affected the CSC's ability to handle the volume of calls were to do with a lack of communication of intended mail-outs of leaflets etc. When the CSC was not informed of mail-outs it was impossible for the CSC to plan ahead for the most effective use of its resources.

3.11 Despite the hard work of the CSA's and Supervisors, all of the factors mentioned above led to a period of very poor performance and a rise in the number of complaints from customers, officers and members about the ability of the CSC to answer calls.

4. Actions taken

4.1 A number of possible solutions were identified to try to lessen the impact of the volume of calls received during the summer. The actions taken were a mix of very short term and longer term actions and they were put in place to try to prevent future incidents of a similar nature.

4.2 A new call routing mechanism using an IVR system was introduced which allows customers to by-pass the CSC if they want to speak to East Durham Homes or if they know the name or extension number of the officer they want to speak to in the Council. The system lets callers press 1 to be routed through to EDH and press 2 to be routed through to PC Consoles which are

quicker at dealing with switchboard-type calls. Customers who do not wish to press buttons or have older BT telephones always have the option of holding on the line to speak to a CSA – these calls are routed into the CSC.

- 4.3 We have contacted the marketing team at EDH and are working with them to try to improve the marketing of the EDH freephone number (e.g. it is currently not listed in the telephone directory).
- 4.4 A new Telephony Policy is currently being drawn up which will define the use of direct dial numbers, voicemail, hunt groups, diverts etc. throughout the Council. This is being drawn up by the Assistant Chief Executive, in collaboration with the Heads of IS & e-Government, Customer Services and Personnel, and will be brought through the political decision-making process in the early in 2008. Direct dial numbers have been introduced for colleagues and family members of officers to avoid calls having to be routed via the CSC.
- 4.5 We have delayed the migration of some services to the CSC to allow us to assess the impacts of the actions taken since August.
- 4.6 Through the Corporate Support Team Heads of Service have been asked to identify the peak periods of the year for calls to their departments to help the CSC plan its resources more effectively.
- 4.7 The number of CSA's which are able to be off on holiday has been reduced so that extra resource is available during holiday periods.
- 4.8 As part of the plan to lessen the impact of the higher call volumes some part-time CSA's have temporarily altered their working hours to better match the pattern of calls.
- 4.9 Some temporary staff were employed for a short period of time to handle switchboard calls and overtime/temporary increases in hours for part-time CSA's was offered (but still within current budgets).
- 4.10 During very busy periods the Supervisors have staffed the reception in Building 9 or the PC Consoles to free up more CSA's to handle calls.

5. Impacts

- 5.1 The impact of all of the actions taken has been very positive, with performance improving steadily from September to November, as can be seen in the following table:

Customer Service Centre Monthly Performance Report November 2007

	September		October		November		CSC Target
	CSC	Envirocall	CSC	Envirocall	CSC	Envirocall	
Volume of calls offered	21335	4554	24822	5275	23239	4634	
Number of calls answered	17795	4425	20330	5123	21680	4521	
% answered in 20 seconds	54	88	52	84	65	86	80
Average time to answer (secs)	44	9	47	11	29	9	20
% Calls abandoned	11.6	2.8	12.7	2.9	6.6	2.4	3.9
% Calls abd less short calls	10.5	1.5	11.6	1.6	5.8	1.4	3.9
% Calls dissuaded	0.07	0	0.1	0	0.06	0	0.1
Average call duration (secs)	102		100		97		
Number of e-mails	84	-	136	-	64	-	
Number of faxes	0	-	0	-	3	-	
Number of reception visits	679	-	589	-	407	-	
Number of formal complaints (including premature LGO)	19	-	19	-	7	-	
Number of compliments	0	-	3	-	0	-	
Number of Ombudsman Complaints	1	-	2	-	2	-	
Average LGO Turnaround (days)	28	-	N/A (ongoing)	-	N/A (ongoing)	-	28
% First Call Resolution	-	-	-	-	-	-	80
Customer Satisfaction (% Satisfied/Good/Excellent)	93	-	93	-	93	-	80

Comments:

Calls transferred to EDH via IVR option 1 = 1321 (5.7% of total calls)

Calls routed via IVR option 2 (consoles) = 1883

New call routing mechanism went live on 22nd (option 2 on the front end message)

The option 2 calls are counted but the statistics above do not show how quickly they are answered.

Unexpected increase in calls after 21st due to HMRC data loss

5.2 Undoubtedly the biggest improvement in performance has come from the introduction of the new call routing mechanism (IVR system and the PC

Consoles) in late November which has seen approximately 5% of all daily CSC calls being diverted straight to EDH without having to tie-up CSA's. Also, approximately 30% of all daily callers are choosing option 2 as they know the name or extension number of the officer they want to speak to. Therefore, c. 35% of all daily calls on the Council's main number are not having to queue in the CSC. Feedback from customers and colleagues has been very positive about how much quicker they've had their calls answered and customer satisfaction with how their calls have been dealt with remains very high.

- 5.3 There are still approximately 10% of daily callers who are not using the options to route their calls most effectively but these, and calls the CSC should be handling, have been more easily dealt with because of the new routing mechanism. This is a better service for all customers ringing the Council and has the added benefit of providing more variety into the work of the CSA's, which is also proving popular.
- 5.4 Having temporarily increased/alterd the working hours of some part-time CSA's has also helped to provide better coverage throughout the working week. However, these are temporary arrangements and are only in place until the end of March (which will help to provide a little extra resource during the annual Council Tax bill run).
- 5.5 We are unable to assess the impact of the introduction of direct dial numbers until the approval of the new Telephony Policy. Even then, it will take some time for the effects of the policy to be felt within the CSC.

6. Implications

- 6.1 **Financial** - There are no financial implications.
- 6.2 **Legal** - There are no legal implications.
- 6.3 **Policy** - There are no policy implications.
- 6.4 **Risk** - There are no risks as this report is for information only.
- 6.5 **Communications** - There are no communications implications.
- 6.6 **Corporate** - There are no implications although the continued development of the Customer Service Centre is central to the Council's Corporate Plan Priority of Quality services for all and of improving access to services for customers.
- 6.7 **Equality and diversity** - There are no equality and diversity implications.
- 6.8 **E-Government** - There are no implications for the e-Government agenda of the Council.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1 It is recommended that Resources Scrutiny Committee notes the information within this report and recognises the work undertaken so far in the development of the Council's Customer Services Centre.