

Date of meeting:	10 th September 2024		
Report to:	Overview & Scrutiny Committee (Regulatory, Compliance & Corporate Services)		
Report of:	Executive Director of Corporate Resources & Commercial		
Portfolio:	Corporate Services		
Wards affected:	All		
Is this a key decision:	No	Included in Forward Plan:	No
Exempt/confidential report:	No		

Summary:

The report provides details of customer activity to the Council’s Contact Centre and One Stop Shop service. It also outlines the variety of access channels for customers, including web-based services, and how the Council continues to improve the quality and consistency of services. Importantly, it provides clarity on the measures in place to deliver customer service excellence for those using the range of services.

It sets out actions and recommendations as to the direction that the Council’s customer services will take in the future in response to both the availability of more access channels, and customer expectations that councils are providing web-based services.

A presentation is attached at Appendix 1 providing a summary overview of service delivery and volumetric data.

Recommendation(s):

That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee:-

- (1) Notes the current position of customer services provided by the Council as set out within the report and presentation attached at Appendix 1
- (2) Considers the proposed action plan and recommendations
- (3) Agree to recommendations set out in the action plan.

1. The Rationale and Evidence for the Recommendations

1.1 Sefton Council's Customer Services team is committed to improving access and quality of all services offered, ensuring that customers who contact the Council receive the best experience possible whilst making the best use of available technology and online services.

1.2 Whilst the team takes great pride in the services that it provides to customers and residents it recognises that there is always room for improvement. In addition to those who need to contact the Council regularly, there will be many people who will need support for the first time.

1.3 The team's approach and strategy is to provide clarity to all staff, residents and customers on the measures that the Council is taking to provide excellent customer service and how it continues to strive for improvement.

1.4 At Sefton, the aim is to put customers and residents first at all times by providing excellent customer satisfaction, by ensuring that all services are:

- Easy to use and understand - This is of vital importance to online services, as simplifying processes can maximise the number of customers and residents that can be self-sufficient, freeing up staff to deal with customers and residents who have complex enquiries and those who need help most.
- Flexible to the particular needs of each customer and accessible through all devices and channels - Staff should have the required knowledge, training and flexibility to go above and beyond for customers and residents, meaning all needs are catered for. Additionally, services are digital by design – online will be the first choice for those who are able. Staff, and all those accessing our services, will be clear about the digital offer and services will be responsive. Moving customers and residents online reduces the demand on staff, freeing them up to help those who may not have a device or have more complex needs.
- Meeting customer and resident's expectations and, when possible, resolving enquiries at the first point of contact in a timely manner is of the utmost importance. The Council aims to resolve enquiries the first time a customer or resident makes contact, and where this is not possible, they will be signposted to a trusted service that can support them.
- It is evident that more customers and residents are accessing everyday services online. Consequently, the Council's digital offer has become important than ever. The Council therefore strives to make the online customer journey accessible, user-friendly and straightforward, and continues to regularly explore and invest in digital transformation so that customers and residents can benefit from various online self-service portals.

1.5 Technology

The Council has heavily invested in new technology for a number of services, including highest-volume services i.e. Bins and Council Tax, that allows customers to view and manage various records via safe and secure customer portals, enabling access to services via a tablet, laptop and most mobile devices. While some of the portals have only been recently implemented, it is pleasing to see customer contact for a number of services reduce and it is expected for that trend to continue. The primary portals being used by service users are as follows:

- **MyServices - Customer Experience Platform (CXP) portal for various Council services**

The CXP-based MyServices portal allows customers to register for an online account where they can now access services such as:

- Various services related to Bins, Recycling, Bulky Items collections, Clinical and Garden Waste
- Street Services such as dog-fouling, fly-tipping, graffiti removal, rear entry cleaning etc.
- Stray Dog Service
- Highways, Street Lighting, Traffic and Council Car Parks
- Planning & Building Control
- Some Sports and Leisure Services
- Anti-Social Behaviour reporting
- Enrolment for Sefton Community Learning Service courses

As well as submitting service requests, the MyRequests section of the portal also allows users to track, amend, cancel and escalate some types of service request. In time, the portal could be further developed to include widgets tailored to the customer profile e.g. bin calendars, nearest services, my councillor/MP etc.

At present there are over 23,000 registered users for MyServices on CXP, however it is expected that this will continue to increase.

- **MyAccount (Council Tax Portal)**

The 'My Account' portal implemented for Council Tax customers in October 2023 has been a notable success. Once registered for an account, customers can do all of the following:

- Sign up to paperless billing and access their bill 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. All bills are stored on the online account, eliminating the requirement to keep paper copies.
- View up-to-date account information and check their balance.
- Sign up for Direct Debit and update payment details instantly.
- Apply for any Discounts or Exemptions that they may be eligible for.
- Make changes to their account without needing to speak to a Customer Services Advisor in the Contact Centre or One Stop Shops.

Between October 2023 – July 2024, over 20,000 Sefton households have registered for a 'My Account' which has significantly reduced workloads for the back-office Council Tax team.

- **Citizen Access Benefits (Benefits Portal)**

A benefits portal has been implemented for claimants of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction. Once claimants have registered, they may use the portal to:

- Make a new claim.
- Retrieve and continue with a claim previously started.
- Report relevant changes of circumstance or address.
- View claim summary or Housing Benefit/Council Tax Reduction letters
- Upload evidence.

- **Taxi Licensing (Rocktime portal)**

The Taxi Licensing system was successfully implemented on 2nd April 2024. This includes an online portal which now allows all taxi drivers, vehicle owners and operators to:

- Apply online.
- Retrieve and continue with an application previously started.
- Upload various evidence documents.
- Pay all licensing fees.

At present, there are over 3,600 customers who have registered on the portal in just 3-months.

The Council also have a number of other customer portals, managed within departments/service areas rather than by the Customer Services team, including Parking, School Admissions and Active Sefton. While the various portals cover a wide range of services it is notable that each is currently offered as a distinct account requiring customers to navigate to, register for and log in to each separately and from different locations on the Council website. Bringing all the portals together under a single point of access may bring about improvements to their accessibility and the overall customer journey for residents. This option will be explored further with the Council's ICT Team and its Customer Journey Development Lead officer.

1.6 Access Channels: How Customers Access Council Services and Proposed Action Plan

The table below shows how customers are accessing Council services and the volumes of contact that have been received over the last two years for each channel of contact. It is proposed for members to agree to the recommendations and the timescales proposed.

Access Channel	Contact Volumes 2022/23	Contact Volumes 2023/24	Current position	Recommendations	Timescale
Telephone	209,315	200,194	Very effective for basic enquiries, signposting and first point of contact resolution. Too many calls are handled from customers who could go online.	Reduce call volumes by at least 5% year-on-year by continuing to actively encourage customers to go online if they are able to so. Prioritising telephone calls from customers who need assistance most.	31 st March 2025, and each year thereafter
Visits to One Stop Shops	37,498	36,910	Essential for customers with complex enquiries and customers who are digitally	While visits are initially likely to increase due to Taxi Licensing drivers requiring to attend Bootle One Stop Shop to provide	30 th September 2025, and each year thereafter.

			excluded	<p>various evidence, to be uploaded into the new taxi portal, this will not be the case from September 2025, and a decrease in visits is then expected.</p> <p>Continue to provide a comprehensive service for customers with complex enquiries.</p> <p>Ensure support is provided to customers who are digitally excluded.</p> <p>Enhance the service that is offered from Southport.</p>	
E-mail	29,093	24,751	Broadly ineffective due to lengthy response times from service areas - contact by e-mail is increased when Contact Centre is busy handling telephone calls	Gradually phase out this option of contact and increase use of webchat and website activity	31 st March 2027
Social media	<p>The most popular channels, as of 31st March 2024, are as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Twitter (26,753 followers) 2. Facebook (16,904 fans) 3. LinkedIn (11,227 followers) 4. Instagram (6,313 followers) 		<p>News, campaigns, and important service information is frequently circulated via existing Social Media accounts.</p> <p>Incoming responses and general enquiries are answered through general threads for</p>	<p>Continue to develop Social Media content and explore better ways to provide more timely, relevant and accurate responses to incoming enquiries and service requests.</p> <p>Review SM platforms in use, do they remain relevant, are there any additional platforms the Council should utilising.</p>	Continuous and ongoing with Communications Team

			broad topics and Direct Messaging for user specific enquiries and service requests.		
Website / Online	<p>The most viewed service areas, in Q4 2023/24, were as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bins pages (415,021 views) 2. Council Tax pages (124,082 views) 3. Jobs page (48,726 views) 4. Search and View Planning applications and appeals (31,333) 		The Council's preferred method of contact allowing customers to access service information, and trigger service requests.	<p>Continue to improve technology, online services and e-forms.</p> <p>Encourage customers to go online.</p> <p>Consolidate online offerings under a common point of access.</p>	Continuous and ongoing working with ICT Team

1.7 Commitment to excellent Customer Service

• Customer Service Excellence

The Customer Services team has achieved the Customer Service Excellence (CSE) accreditation for a number of years and remains committed to this in the future. The CSE standard is a trademark of the Cabinet Office, and acts as a quality mark to drive continuous improvement. On an annual basis, the team has been successfully assessed against the criteria of the standard by a licensed certification body that measures evidence and performance in the following areas:-

- Customer Insight
- The Culture of the Organisation
- Information and Access
- Delivery
- Timeliness and Quality of Service.

• Customer Satisfaction

The Customer Services team, and the criteria for the CSE accreditation, recognise that an important source of ideas for improvements is customer and resident feedback. Part of this feedback is a Customer Satisfaction Survey, conducted at Bootle One Stop Shop and The Atkinson, twice a year and the team is exploring the options of doing something similar via the Contact Centre and the Council's website to drive further improvements.

Results from the Customer Satisfaction Survey that was completed as recently as May 2024, confirmed that all questions asked in the survey received a very high level of customer satisfaction. The full report can be found at: [cs-user-experience-survey-report-5-24.pdf \(sefton.gov.uk\)](https://sefton.gov.uk/cs-user-experience-survey-report-5-24.pdf)

2. **Financial Implications** : Approved business cases are in place for technology investments setting out financial implications.
3. **Legal Implications - None**
4. **Corporate Risk Implications - None**
5. **Staffing HR Implications** - Customers using online services will free up staff to provide support to vulnerable residents, or those needing support to access digital services.

6 Conclusion

It is evident from the information and data provided above that the Council's various online options are reducing customer contact into the Contact Centre and this needs to be continued to be encouraged. However, it is recognised and understood that not everyone can get online or is able to use online services.

The team remains committed to delivering vital services face-to-face to digitally excluded customers and residents and continues to provide support offered by staff in the Contact Centre and One Stop Shops.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

The Council could choose not to offer online customer services and instead continue with just telephone and face to face services. However, it must be recognised that many people now expect councils to offer web-based services as standard, and that in order for customers to deal with the Council as quickly and as easily as possible, in a cost-effective manner, then we must make the best use of use of technology.

It is however recognised that people using council-services have different requirements, capabilities and experiences and so the Council remains committed to improving the quality and consistency of services so that they are accessible to all by having the right mix of digital and non-digital services to meet all needs.

Equality Implications:

The equality implications have been identified and mitigated. The Council aims to ensure that services are accessible to all by having digital and non-digital options

available, and appropriate support in place when required.
Impact on Children and Young People: None
Climate Emergency Implications: The recommendations within this report will have a Neutral impact.

(A) Internal Consultations

The Executive Director of Corporate Resources and Commercial (FD.7759/24.....) and the Chief Legal and Democratic Officer (LD.5859/24.....) have been consulted and any comments have been incorporated into the report.

(B) External Consultations - Not applicable

Implementation Date for the Decision :

Following the expiry of the “call-in” period for the Committee’s decision.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: Customer Services Activity Presentation September 2024, key highlights show

- 4.4% reduction in calls made to the Contact Centre between 2022/23 – 2023/24
- Visits to One Stop Shops have remained steady
- Since 2020, customers have embraced online payment options for Council services:-
 - 95% reduction in payments made via OSS Kiosks since 2019/20
 - 45% increase in payments made via Council website and portals
 - 41% increase in payments made via automated payment telephone line.