
Customer Journey Task & Finish Group - Interim Report

Committee considering report:	Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission
Date of Committee:	29 November 2022
Task Group Chairman	Councillor James Cole
Date Task Group Chairman agreed report:	8 November 2022
Report Author:	Gordon Oliver

1 Purpose of the Report

To present to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission (OSMC) the work undertaken by the Task and Finish Group set up to review the customer journey for West Berkshire Council service users inside and outside of office hours.

2 Recommendation

To note the Task and Finish Group's preliminary findings as outlined in Section 6 of this report.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	Given that this report is merely presenting the Task and Finish Group's preliminary findings to OSMC, there are no financial implications at this stage. A full assessment will be included in the final report to OSMC and any subsequent OSMC report to the Executive.
Human Resource:	Given that this report is merely presenting the Task and Finish Group's preliminary findings to OSMC, there are no HR implications at this stage. A full assessment will be included in the final report to OSMC and any subsequent OSMC report to the Executive.
Legal:	None

Risk Management:	None			
Property:	None			
Policy:	The Task Group's indicative findings would help to deliver aspects of the Council Strategy related to the priority 'Ensure Sustainable Services through Innovation and Partnerships'.			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		X		
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		X		
Environmental Impact:		X		
Health Impact:		X		
ICT Impact:	X			Improvements in ICT provision would deliver benefits in terms of the customer experience and also in terms of more efficient working practices. However, the indicative findings would also have implications for ICT, the Contact Centre and the Out of Hours Service.

Digital Services Impact:	X			There are proposals for improvements in digital services that would deliver benefits in terms of the customer experience and also in terms of more efficient working practices.
Council Strategy Priorities:	X			Adoption of the report's recommendations would help to deliver aspects of the Council Strategy related to the priority 'Ensure Sustainable Services through Innovation and Partnerships'.
Core Business:	X			The report's recommendations support core business activities across the Council.
Data Impact:		X		
Consultation and Engagement:	See full details within the report.			

4 Executive Summary

- 4.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission (OSMC) established a Task and Finish Group to look at the customer journey across in- and out-of-hours services.
- 4.2 The scope of the review was broken down into four main parts:
- Part 1: Out of Hours Emergency Contact Centre and Response
 - Part 2: Office hours customer contacts
 - Part 3: Office hours customer contacts (other local authorities)
 - Part 4: Good practice and recommendations
- 4.3 The Group has met 10 times between April and the October 2022.
- 4.4 This interim report sets out some initial findings in relation to:
- The Out of Hours Emergency Contact Centre
 - The Council's own Contact Centre
 - The Council's website

- Provision for disabled customers
- Customer service standards and training

4.5 Further work is required to look at the customer journey within services that have high numbers of customer contacts and / or complaints, as well as examples of best practice in other local authorities. A final report will be presented to OSMC in March 2023.

5 Supporting Information

Introduction

5.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission (OSMC) established a Task and Finish Group to look at the customer journey across office hours services and out-of-hours services. Terms of reference were drafted with the help of senior officers, and the scope was broken down into four main parts as follows:

- Part 1: Out of Hours Emergency Contact Centre and Response
- Part 2: Office hours customer contacts
- Part 3: Office hours customer contacts (other local authorities)
- Part 4: Good practice and recommendations

5.2 The full Terms of Reference are provided in Appendix A.

Background

5.3 The Task and Finish Group met 10 times between April and October 2022. Members considered a wide range of evidence and interviewed key witnesses as shown below.

Table 5.1: Details of Task Group Meetings

Meeting Date	Focus of Meeting	Witnesses
14 April 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of the terms of reference• Work planning	N/A
25 April 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Out of Hours Service	Carolyn Richardson
17 May 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Contact Centre• Digital Services	Sarah Clarke Sharon Ogden Phil Rumens
7 June 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interview with Chief Executive• Residents' survey• Engagement with town/parish councils• Draft member survey	Nigel Lynn Joseph Holmes Sarah Clarke Catalin Bogos
6 July 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Member interview planning• Disabled customers/Adult Social Care data• Additional Out of Hours Service data	N/A

25 July 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Member interviews 	Cllr Alan Law Cllr Adrian Abbs Cllr Claire Rowles
9 August 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place Review – initial findings and next steps Mystery shopping – scoping 	Eric Owens Sean Murphy Anne Ewins
23 August 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adult Social Care presentation Complaints data 	Paul Coe
28 September 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and work planning session 	N/A
31 October 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Member Interview Environment presentation 	Cllr Hilary Cole Jon Winstanley

5.4 An early focus of the review was the Out of Hours Emergency Service, and a preliminary report was brought to [OSMC on 22 May 2022](#).

5.5 The Task and Finish Group was originally due to present its final report to the OSMC meeting on 6 September 2022. This was initially deferred to the 29 November meeting, but a further delay was subsequently requested. Reasons for the extended timescales included:

- **Scope of the review** – the wide-ranging nature of the review meant that it was impossible to complete it within the timescales originally set;
- **Member availability** – there was a need to change membership part-way through the review - Cllr Adrian Abbs replaced Cllr Lee Dillon on the Task Group from August 2022;
- **Death of Her Majesty the Queen** – officers involved in supporting the task group and providing evidence were involved in organising local events;
- **Place Review** – the timescale for completion of the Place Review had to be extended by several weeks to allow for additional consultation;
- **Leave** – Members and officers had consecutive periods of leave during September and October, during which time meetings could not take place.

5.6 In light of the resultant delays, it was agreed that the Task Group should provide an interim report to the meeting on 29 November 2022. This is intended to build on the previous report on the Emergency Out of Hours service and set out the Task Group's indicative findings to date. A further report will be presented to the OSMC meeting in March 2023.

Findings

5.7 The initial findings of the Task and Finish Group are summarised below with reference to the questions contained in the Terms of Reference.

Part 1: Out of Hours Emergency Centre and Response

5.8 Currently, an Emergency Out of Hours response is provided to respond to a wide range of situations, including the following:

- Major incidents
- Social care emergencies, safeguarding concerns or homelessness
- Highways issues (e.g. fallen trees or traffic light failure)
- Flooding of properties and roads
- Emergency repairs to Council-owned temporary accommodation
- Lost and found dogs
- Car park issues

5.9 The Emergency Out of Hours Contact Centre is provided by an external contractor. The current provider is not local to West Berkshire, which means that staff may not be familiar with the area and may struggle to identify the location of issues being reported, or any knock-on implications of these issues. However, it is acknowledged that this can be an issue even for West Berkshire Council staff.

5.10 Bracknell Forest Council provides the Emergency Out of Hours service for social care emergencies, safeguarding concerns and homelessness on behalf of all of the Berkshire unitary authorities. This is a highly specialist service provided by senior social workers.

5.11 The Public Protection Partnership has a dedicated Animal Warden Team, which deals with lost and found dogs on behalf of West Berkshire Council and Bracknell Forest Council.

5.12 The Parking Team has an emergency duty officer on call to deal with emergencies such as customers being unable to get out of the Kennet Centre Car Park after the car park has closed.

5.13 The Out of Hours service is not intended to replicate the full range of Council services, or even the services provided by the Council's own Contact Centre, since the cost of this would be prohibitive. The out of hours services are mostly either statutory requirements or are provided to mitigate the risk of serious harm to individuals or property. The Task and Finish Group considered that this was an appropriate and proportionate approach.

5.14 Incidents can only be reported to the Emergency Out of Hours service over the phone – there is no option to do this via digital channels. This reflects the fact that they are emergencies and ensures that Contact Centre staff can ask questions of clarification about the incident and its location.

5.15 The telephone number for the Out of Hours Emergency Contact Centre is different to the Council's main number. Consequently, customers may not know the correct number. The number is given in the pre-recorded message played when customers call the Council outside of normal office hours. However, it may be difficult for customers to make a note of this if they have no means of writing it down. Alternatively, customers

could look up the number on the Council's website, but this may not be possible if calling from an area with a weak mobile phone signal.

- 5.16 Although, the telephone number for the Out of Hours Emergency Contact Centre is provided on the website, it requires customers to click on the 'Report a Problem' page or scroll to the bottom of the homepage and click on the 'Out of Hours Emergencies' link.
- 5.17 Previously, the message about reporting specific emergencies outside of normal office hours was not prominently displayed on the 'Report a Problem' page of the Council's website. As a result, customers sometimes missed it and tried to report urgent matters via the website rather than to the Emergency Out of Hours service by telephone. Reports submitted in this way are not picked up until the next working day, which could be too late for critical events. This issue has already been addressed, with a more prominent message displayed in a contrasting colour at the top of the page.
- 5.18 Customers calling the Emergency Out of Hours service have to select one of four options:
- Option 1 - to be redirected for concerns relating to social care for adults and children or homelessness
 - Option 2 - to be redirected for lost or found dogs
 - Option 3 - to be redirected to car park issues
 - Option 4 - to be passed to a call handler for emergencies only
- 5.19 Statistics for the Out of Hours Service are provided in Appendix B. The initial pre-recorded message is quite long and takes just over a minute to complete. Statistics for the two year period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2022 showed that over 3% of calls were abandoned during the first 60 seconds. It would be logical to assume that in most of these cases, the caller had decided that the issue they were reporting was not an emergency.
- 5.20 Just over 1 in 10 calls were abandoned without the customer speaking to an operator. Nearly 70% of these were abandoned beyond the first 60 seconds after the pre-recorded message had finished, with around 40% abandoned after 3 minutes. This suggests that there may have been some genuine emergencies that went unreported, or the caller had simply delayed reporting the issue.
- 5.21 Call statistics for the Emergency Out of Hours Contact Centre showed that 68% of calls were answered within 30 seconds, with 81% answered within 90 seconds. This is broadly similar to those for the Council's own contact centre (see below). However, it would be reasonable to expect a quicker response for customers reporting an emergency, since the consequences of a delay may be serious. Inevitably there is a trade-off between performance and cost.
- 5.22 Some day-to-day variation in performance is to be expected. For example, call numbers increase following major incidents that affect large numbers of people. However,

resources are usually increased in anticipation of additional calls arising from known events such as storms.

- 5.23 Currently, residents have no way of knowing if an incident has been reported to the Emergency Out of Hours Contact Centre and is already being dealt with, since there is no way for the Out of Hours service to post to the Council's social media account or the website. This means that the service may receive multiple reports for the same incident, which could add unnecessarily to call wait times for those who are reporting other incidents.
- 5.24 Members of the Task Group highlighted recent incidents, where weaknesses had been exposed in the Out of Hours response, including:
- A persistent alarm at York House (a Council owned building) over a weekend. The Out of Hours Contact Centre was unable to contact the key holder due to a contact list being out of date, and as a result, the alarm was ringing for over 60 hours. This highlighted the need to ensure that the OOH Contact Centre was given up-to-date information.
 - Incidents related to planning enforcement, where there had been delays in obtaining and serving the appropriate enforcement notices. However, it was acknowledged that this was in part due to courts not being open at weekends.
- 5.25 Copies of incident reports for these events were requested so Members could be assured that lessons were being learned and changes implemented. The Task Group had concerns about key holder contact lists not being updated and the lack of a duty Planning Enforcement Officer.
- 5.26 A further concern was in relation to the number of Emergency Duty Officers across the Council. Numbers had reduced over time as officers have left or have indicated that they no longer want to perform the role. This needs to be addressed in order to ensure ongoing resilience and to reduce the burden on those that remain.
- 5.27 It is understood that mystery shopping is not currently undertaken to test the Emergency Out of Hours Contact Centre. This was done previously but lapsed during Covid due to a lack of resource. The Task Group was keen to do this in order to test the processes for both of the above scenario types. However, this requires careful planning to avoid mobilising services and incurring costs. A proposal is being developed for this in conjunction with the Service Manager.
- 5.28 Consideration was given as to where the contract for the Out of Hours Contact Centre should sit and whether this should be managed by the Council's Contact Centre Manager, since she would have relevant expertise. However, it was recognised that the Joint Emergency Planning Unit Manager would still need to be closely involved to ensure that processes were kept up to date and reviews carried out following major incidents.

Part 2: Office Hours Customer Contacts

- 5.29 Customers can currently contact the Council in a number of ways, including:

- In person
- By phone
- By email
- Using an online form
- Using the chatbot.

Contact Centre

5.30 Despite a shift towards use of digital communications channels in recent years, the Contact Centre is still the main point of contact for many customers. Advisors operate the Council's switchboard and the Contact Centre also offers in person, telephone and email customer service on behalf of a range of Council services under a service level agreement, including:

- Revenues
- Benefits
- Planning
- Streetcare
- Waste
- Children's Services
- Concessionary Fares
- Environmental Health
- Libraries
- Parking

5.31 Many of the above services have their own contact numbers, and residents are encouraged to use these to avoid double handling by the switchboard. However, this can be confusing for the customer, particularly where they have a need to deal with multiple services.

5.32 Contact centre advisors may be trained to answer queries for one or more of the above services. However, they generally deal with simpler, information-only queries. Calls that require technical advice are usually referred to professionals within the service.

5.33 Call volumes for the last two financial years are shown in Appendix C. This shows that the majority of calls were to the switchboard, Streetcare (including Waste), and Council Tax.

5.34 The table below shows how the Contact Centre's performance compares with some industry standard metrics¹.

Table 5.1: WBC Contact Centre Performance vs Industry Standards

	WBC Contact Centre	Industry Standard
First contact resolution	85-90%	70-75%
Call answering	75-83% of calls answered within 90 seconds	80% of calls answered within 20 seconds
Call abandon rate	5-9%	2-5%

5.35 Although these industry standards for key metrics include call centres of commercial organisations and relate to 2018, they still provide useful context. The figures show that the Council's Contact Centre performs well on first contact resolution, but less so on call answering and the call abandon rate.

5.36 As would be expected, there may be significant variations within these statistics, subject to: call volumes, the complexity of the queries received, and advisor availability. Metrics for Q4 2021/22 showed that nearly all calls to the switchboard were answered within 90 seconds, but for some services, such as Council Tax, this figure dropped to around 50-60%. Also, first contact resolution statistics varied significantly between services. Queries about Benefits and Council Tax were most likely to be resolved first time (typically 95% or more), but figures were much lower for queries to Children's Services and Planning (between 29 and 56%).

5.37 The Contact Centre's target for call answering had been relaxed from 80% of calls being answered within 30 seconds to 80% being answered within 90 seconds following the loss of two FTE staff in order to deliver savings. (The Task Group discovered a previous set of contact standards from 2015 that set an aim of calls to the switchboard being answered within 15 seconds.) This change had also affected the average wait time for customers arriving at reception, which had increased from 8 to 10 minutes.

5.38 The Contact Centre does not currently tell waiting customers what position they are in the queue, or how long it is likely to take to answer their call. This may be a source of frustration for customers and may lead to increased levels of calls being abandoned. If a caller knows that they are likely to have a long wait, then they can make an informed decision as to whether they should remain on the call or try again at a different time when there may be less of a queue.

5.39 The Contact Centre generally attracts a low level of complaints and staff regularly receive compliments from customers. However, the service does not routinely undertake mystery shopper or customer satisfaction surveys. A paid-for system was used previously, but the results were difficult to extract and analyse, so this system was not maintained. A consultant has been commissioned to look at customer experience

¹ Standards provided by callcentrehelper.com (2018 data)

for services with the highest numbers of transactions and the results will be considered as part of the Task Group's final report.

5.40 Members reported that when they had rung the contact centre, the advisors had not always included 'West Berkshire Council' in their greeting. This was considered important to reassure customers that they had dialled the correct number.

5.41 The Council currently has an outdated phone system with a manual switchboard. Customers who ask to be put through to an individual officer are frustrated when the officer cannot take the call. Key issues include:

- The switchboard operator is unable to see in advance if the officer is available to take the call.
- There is no option for the caller to return to the switchboard if the officer is unavailable. This is a particular source of irritation for some Members.
- There are no 'hunting groups' set up to divert the call to other team members if the first officer is unable to take the call.

5.42 The Council currently uses Openscape for voice calls. Most officers use this to divert their work number to their work mobiles and also to make calls through their work mobiles, even when in the office. However, some officers do not have work mobiles, which means that some calls end up leaving the Council's network entirely.

5.43 The Task Group noted that the Council was looking to implement a new phone system with an automated switchboard and an interactive voice response (IVR) system that would seek to address some of the issues identified above.

Website

5.44 Use of the Council's website has increased significantly in recent years, which has helped to relieve demand on other channels. Website traffic is around 2.5 times higher now than in 2015, while the number of calls to the Contact Centre has remained broadly unchanged. Online interactions are undoubtedly more efficient and therefore cheaper than other forms of customer contact. However, they are not appropriate for all forms of contact and not all customers are comfortable in engaging in this way or have the skills or technology to be able to do so. Therefore, a multi-channel approach is still needed.

5.45 Key functions of the website include:

- Finding information
- Reporting problems
- Booking systems for events and recycling centre visits
- Application forms and other online forms
- Taking payments
- Logins for different customer accounts

- 5.46 The Task Group highlighted perceived weaknesses with the website's search functionality (as confirmed by the Member survey and interviews – see below). Currently, only around 4% of visits to the website involve use of the search facility. Feedback on the search facility is actively sought, but in Q4 of 2021/22, just 56 people provided feedback to say that they could not find what they were looking for (0.13% of searches). Where feedback was provided, search functionality was improved. However, it is recognised that the search function will never be as comprehensive as that offered by proprietary search engines such as Google and Bing. These currently generate around half of all visits to the website.
- 5.47 The website has been the subject of a recent review. As a result, it has a completely new look and the structure was the subject of a public consultation exercise. This has been designed to help users to navigate the site and find information more easily.
- 5.48 Customers use a variety of different devices to access the Council's website, which presents its own challenges in terms of ensuring that information displays correctly and functionality is maintained. Currently, 51% of visits to the website are by mobile phone, 43% by desktop PCs and just 6% via tablets.
- 5.49 The Task Group highlighted some issues with the new-look website, particularly in relation to accessibility tools and the navigation menu not being visible at all times. Also, it was felt that navigation was not as good as it could be for mobile phone users. Councillor Adrian Abbs is an expert on website and user interface design and provided the Task Group with a detailed set of observations which are being reviewed by the Digital Team.
- 5.50 Member interviews highlighted a number of issues with the 'report a problem' page. These included:
- It can be difficult to determine the correct option for reporting particular problems (e.g. flooding), and there is no information to guide the user. This can make it more difficult to submit the report and for the user to provide subsequent updates.
 - Existing reports not being shown on the map, which could result in duplicate reports being submitted.
 - A limited number of address points being returned for postcode searches.
 - Clicking on the map can sometimes result in a message incorrectly being displayed to say that the location is not within West Berkshire.
 - There is no option to attach photos of the problem.
 - Customers do not always receive updates when the reported issue has been resolved.
- 5.51 Also, anecdotal evidence suggests that while members of the public find the 'report a problem' page easy to find, the form is difficult to use. However, it is understood that the 'report a problem' page is being replaced with a new proprietary system.

5.52 Recent website successes included the move to digital permits for the recycling centres, as well as delivery of several major projects to support the response to the Covid pandemic, such as the Test and Trace Fund applications and Covid Winter Grant applications. Also, a chatbot has been introduced, which can be used to answer frequently asked questions. However, this currently has very limited functionality.

5.53 A key focus for the Digital Team is improving the integration of the website with numerous third-party applications and websites to create a seamless experience for the customer. Also, the Task Group welcomes the move to provide customers with a single login for different services, although it is noted that there is still some way to go with this, with multiple logins still required for various third party systems that are currently accessed via the Council's website.

Provision for Disabled Customers

5.54 The Equality Act 2010 requires organisations to make reasonable adjustments to ensure as far as possible that people with disabilities can access the same services and facilities as someone who is not disabled. A person is considered to be disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. These adjustments could be made by:

- Changing the way things are done
- Changing physical features
- Providing extra aids or services

5.55 Facilities and services that the Council currently provides for disabled customers, include:

- Accessible offices
- Accessible public toilets and changing facilities
- Assisted bin collections
- Blue badge parking
- British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation via video relay for deaf customers visiting the contact centre
- Easy read versions of some documents
- Hearing loop in the Council Chamber
- Captioning for live-streamed public meetings
- Social care and respite care for disabled adults, young people and children
- Transport assistance, including concessionary fares for public transport, and provision of accessible taxis

- Provision of the West Berkshire Directory, which contains information for disabled adults and their carers, and for young people, families and professionals supporting families with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND)

- 5.56 OSMC has previously considered the potential for live BSL interpretation of public meetings. However, this would be very labour intensive and costly to implement for all meetings as a matter of course. There is currently no requirement on local authorities to offer this service and no requests for such a service have been received. As an alternative, it may be that BSL interpretations of public meetings could be provided upon request. Further guidance is expected from Central Government next year on the back of the BSL Act 2022.
- 5.57 Irrespective of any future guidance, it would be appropriate for the Council to consider producing BSL videos about its services. Hertfordshire County Council was identified as an example of where this had been done².
- 5.58 Similarly, considerations should be given to producing more 'easy read' versions of key documents and communications. The Council has various forums for engaging with disabled customers, including the Learning Disability Partnership Board and Carers Support Group. However, the Task Group noted that the Disability External Scrutiny Board had lapsed following transfer of responsibility from the Council to Citizens Advice.
- 5.59 The Council also has contracts with Citizens Advice, Educafe, Eight Bells and Dementia Friendly West Berkshire which provide services, support and advocacy for disabled residents and service users.
- 5.60 The Council is currently doing a lot of work to inform its approach to equality, diversity and inclusion and a consultant has been appointed to progress this. A needs assessment has been completed and a public engagement exercise is currently underway. The findings of this work will help to inform priorities for further work, including improvements to provision for disabled residents and service users. Given that this work is progressing, there would be little benefit in the Task Group undertaking parallel engagement with disabled groups at this stage.
- 5.61 Further recommendations on how the Council can improve facilities for disabled customers will be made in relation to individual service areas as part of the final report.

Residents' Survey

- 5.62 West Berkshire Council commissions an annual Residents Survey. The survey methodology follows the LGA's 'Are You Being Served' guidance, aiming to ensure consistency and comparability of similar surveys conducted by other local authorities. In addition, the LGA conducts a telephone survey nationally covering the same questions.
- 5.63 The results of the 2021 survey are summarised below and are grouped on the key themes of the questionnaire:

² <https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/accessibility/british-sign-language-bsl-videos.aspx>

- a) **Attitudes towards the local area** – overall a high proportion of residents are satisfied with the local area (89%) and with the way the Council runs things (64%). For context, the results from the LGA national telephone survey are 78% and 56% respectively.

37% of residents agree that the Council provides value for money, whilst 25% would disagree. For context, it seems that nationally a lower percentage of residents are undecided. In addition, 33% of residents would speak positively about the Council compared to 16% that would speak negatively, and of the residents that contacted the Council in the previous six months, 56% reported a positive experience, compared to 15% that reported a negative one. Work is underway to better inform our residents about the services we deliver, our lower costs compared to similar councils and to adopt a customer charter developed with our residents. The Task Group also felt that this would be an opportunity to ‘shout’ about what the Council does well.

- b) **Service improvement and prioritisation** – services with the highest proportion of residents considering that improvement are required are: *Environment* (in particular, recycling/ waste management/ more materials collected and improved facilities/ services), *Development and Planning* (concerns about the quality of the planning process and effects of overdevelopment), *Communities and Wellbeing* (desire for more/ improved services, and concerns about insufficient support), *Education* (need for additional funding, improved choice and SEN support) and *Adult Social Care* (need for better services, support, facilities and funding).

The Council has made good progress to extend the advice, support and tools made available to residents to support more recycling, composting and reusing. A separate food waste service has just been introduced. A new Local Plan is being prepared and a review of the Planning Service has been completed (through a Place Review) to better respond to residents’ needs. The needs for Health and Wellbeing, Education, Social care and other services are being re-assessed so the Council can prioritise the services that West Berkshire residents need over the next four years.

- c) **Sense of belonging, safety and community** – more than three quarters of residents reported that people get on well together and that friendships and associations in the neighbourhood meant a lot to them. More than half of respondents agree that local people pull together to improve the local area. Under a third responded that they have volunteered in the previous 12 months and they intend to do so in the future. Residents without a long-term health problem or disability (57%) were more likely to agree that people in their local area pulled together, compared to (44%) with a long-term health problem or disability

Problems identified with local areas are *rubbish or litter laying around* (44%) and *people using or dealing drugs* (32%). The street cleaning contractor has been asked to progressively re-focus on this activity after they had to divert staff to bins collection due to Covid sickness levels. The Council’s waste officers have increased the monitoring across the district. Residents are encouraged to report any concerns or provide any intelligence to Thames Valley Police via 101 telephone number or the website, so that the Police can use that information adapt

their patrol plans. The Council works closely with Thames Valley Police through the Building Communities Together partnership and the Building Communities Together team works very closely with the Neighbourhood Police Teams within the District.

- d) Communication and Engagement** – Almost 60% of residents agreed that the Council acts on their concerns and that they felt well informed about services and benefits provided by the Council. However, 45% responded that they were not aware of the e-bulletins from the Council.

48% of the residents have contacted the Council in the previous six months to request services, report a problem or request information. 20% agree that they can influence decisions that affect their local area, whilst 47% disagreed.

A high proportion of residents (75%) prefer to receive information about the Council by e-mail. Subgroups of population (older residents, diverse ethnic groups) prefer other methods (phone, face to face) of communication. A number of activities are planned (including the Residents' Survey), as part of our Communications and Engagement Strategy, focusing on improving the ways in which the Council communicates with residents and how it can reach out to ensure that people and businesses that usually do not or cannot take the opportunities to express their views, are proactively invited to inform the Council's decisions and to shape the ways in which services are delivered.

- e) Personal wellbeing** – The overall results show that West Berkshire residents reported a high level of life satisfaction, feeling worthwhile and happy. The anxiety score is within the low thresholds. However, approximately a quarter of the residents reported low and medium well-being score. These results are within the same thresholds as the national results reported for the period just before the start of the pandemic. The wellbeing of all our residents is being improved through a number of plans such as the Council's Recovery Strategy or the Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

5.64 The results of the Residents' Survey have been used by the Task and Finish Group to identify service areas where more detailed reviews would be required to better understand particular issues with customer satisfaction and the measures that were being introduced to address these.

Complaints

5.65 The Task Group also looked at complaints data provided by the Complaints Officer and by individual services. Services with the highest numbers of complaints included:

- Adult Social Care
- Children and Family Services
- Development and Regulation
- Environment

- Finance and Property

5.66 Most of the above service areas were also flagged in the Residents Survey as being priorities for improvement. Work has been undertaken by the Task and Finish Group to look at the customer journey within some of these services and further work is planned in the coming months.

Members' Survey and Interviews

5.67 In addition to the external customers and service users, elected councillors were identified as a priority to consult as part of the review. As well as being a unique category of customers in their own right, they also had key insights about other customer journeys gained from correspondence with local residents and businesses.

5.68 A survey was sent to all West Berkshire Council Members and nine responses were received. In addition, four Members indicated that they wished to raise particular issues related to the customer journey with the Task and Finish Group directly, so a series of interviews were arranged.

5.69 The results of the Member Survey are shown in Appendix D. A summary of the findings is provided below:

- Members use a variety of different channels when engaging with the Council, but only a minority use the 'report a problem page'.
- There are no significant concerns about the Council's Contact Centre, but there was a suggestion that there should be more cross-training of advisors. Also, switchboard operators did not always know who would be best placed to answer a query.
- Members contact officers across a wide range of service areas, with queries about planning and roads being the most common.
- Members generally found it easy to contact officers – Leisure, Street Lighting and Libraries received the highest ratings, while Planning, Licensing and Trading Standards received the lowest ratings.
- Members were critical of the speed of response from Planning. The Service has been undergoing a fundamental review, and the Task Group has had one presentation on the interim findings, with a second presentation planned to consider the final outcomes of the review and the proposed measures to address any shortcomings.
- Overall, Members were satisfied with how their queries were resolved, although Trading Standards scored lower than other service areas.
- In terms of features for a replacement phone system, the highest priority was given to hunt groups and voicemail. Some concern was expressed that any automated interactive voice system should be easy to use and not make it too difficult to speak to an officer.

- Only one of the Members who responded to the survey had used the Emergency Out of Hours service – they expressed dissatisfaction with the IVR system and the time taken to answer the call.
- In relation to the Council's website, Members indicated that they often found it difficult to find what they were looking for, and the majority of Members who answered the question rated the search facility on the Council's website as 'poor'.
- Only a minority of Members who responded indicated that they had used the 'report a problem' page on the website, but most of these considered it to be 'good' or 'very good'.
- Suggestions for how the 'report a problem' function could be improved were:
 - Not all problems that users want to report are currently covered by the options.
 - The problem categories should be reviewed.
 - It could sometimes be difficult to pinpoint locations on the map.
 - Customers needed to be informed when the reported problem had been resolved.

(It should be noted that the Environment Department are undertaking an upgrade to the problem reporting system that will address the above issues. The upgrade will be complete by the end of the financial year.)

- None of the Members who responded had used the chatbot
- Most of the Members who responded said that they engaged with the Council's social media channels to some degree, with Facebook being the most popular channel and TikTok the least popular, and most shared content from these channels
- Other suggestions for how the customer journey could be improved were:
 - Ensuring Members were kept informed of things happening in their ward.
 - Having more officers available in the office.
 - Making the website less clunky and more user friendly.
 - Providing a list of Members in alphabetic order as well as by ward.
 - Improving engagement with parish councils, including training on planning, flooding and emergency situations.
 - Customer service is patchy across the Council – services should learn from each other, there had to be buy-in from the top level, a Council-wide customer service training programme was needed, the officer who takes a call should own the problem, and managers should answer their own phones.

5.70 Additional points raised in the Members interviews related to:

- Issues with the phone system
- Issues with the 'report a problem' function on the website
- Issues with a lack of consistency on web pages across different services
- The experience of disabled customers
- The Community Infrastructure Levy process and related guidance
- The Council's overall approach and attitude towards customer service
- The work of the Customer First Programme Board

5.71 Although it was recognised that customer service had improved over time, Members still felt that there were pockets where this was less than ideal, and there were some examples where officers were not 'owning' problems reported to them. It was suggested that customer service should be driven by senior officers through the Customer First Programme Board. The Board was considered to have lost strategic focus and be too inward focused, with weak reporting lines and a lack of visibility within the Council.

5.72 Concern was expressed that the Task Group had not been made aware of the existence of the Customer First Programme Board until many months into the review. This meant that there was a risk of the Task Group trying to 'reinvent the wheel' and undertaking abortive work.

6 Proposals

6.1 This section sets out the Task Group's initial findings. Further evidence will be collected in the coming weeks, which will help to further refine these.

Part 1: Out of Hours Emergency Centre and Response

6.2 When a customer calls the Council out of hours, having options that the customer can select so the call is transferred to the relevant Emergency Out of Hours service would mean that customers would not have to note / look up the number.

6.3 A pop-up banner automatically generated by a timed script when the offices are closed would help to provide information about the Out of Hours Contact Centre.

6.4 It would be helpful if information about how to report emergency incidents out of hours could be disseminated via town / parish council websites, newsletters and noticeboards.

6.5 The Task Group suggested that search engine optimisation should be improved to ensure that the emergency out-of-hours number is automatically highlighted by a Bing / Google search. This has already been done by the Digital Team.

6.6 In order to help the Emergency Out of Hours Contact Centre to locate incidents reported by customers, they could consider using the 'What 3 Words' app to allow locations to be pin-pointed to a 3m x 3m square. This is already used by Royal Berkshire Fire and

Rescue Service and is particularly useful where a problem is not at a particular address point.

- 6.7 Consideration could be given as to how social media could be used to disseminate emergency service information to the public, e.g. with a feed to the Council's home page. This could help to inform residents that the service is aware of an incident, and to communicate any related messages about diversion routes and when the incident has been resolved. However, it is recognised that there would be an additional cost for this service.
- 6.8 Provision for customer satisfaction surveys and mystery shopping could be built into the contract for the Emergency Out of Hours Contact Centre. This would help ensure that quality standards are maintained and the service meets customer expectations.
- 6.9 The Task Group felt that it would be helpful for Members to be able to get hold of the Emergency Duty Officer in the event of an emergency.
- 6.10 The Task Group suggested that processes be reviewed for the Out of Hours response to alarms going off in Council buildings, with the key holder database regularly checked and updated and backup contacts nominated, with clear escalation processes put in place. This has been done.
- 6.11 It is suggested that consideration be given to having a duty Planning Enforcement Officer on call to be able to respond swiftly to incidents.
- 6.12 It is considered that changes could be made to the Out of Hours escalation process to ensure that customers receive a call-back from a senior officer in response to ongoing issues after a defined period of time.
- 6.13 The option of having the Council's Contact Centre Manager managing the Emergency Out of Hours contract could be explored, since there are strong synergies between the two operations, and the Contact Centre Manager has experience in running this type of service.

Part 2: Office Hours Customer Contacts

Contact Centre and Phone System

- 6.14 The Task Group supported the proposed replacement of the Council's telephone system. If the replacement system included an automatic switchboard with IVR, this would allow people to self-serve in terms of identifying officers or services that they want to speak to.
- 6.15 The Task Group felt that the new phone system should also ensure that callers can be alerted if an officer is not available to take the call and be given the option to leave a message or speak to another officer, with appropriate 'hunt groups' set up.
- 6.16 It is understood that the new system will include a soft-client installed on all staff and Member laptops to allow calls to be made and received without the need for a mobile phone. This would remove the need for officers to use their own mobile phones when working from home and would greatly reduce the need for the Council to provide staff with mobile phones.

- 6.17 The Task Group considered that callers to the Contact Centre who are placed on hold should be provided with information about their place in the queue, or anticipated wait time until their call is answered.
- 6.18 It is suggested that consideration should be given to cross-training more contact centre advisors so they are able to deal with a wider range of customer queries.
- 6.19 The Task Group advocated for routine mystery and customer satisfaction surveys to better understand how staff are performing, if scripts are being followed, and if the service is meeting customer expectations.

Website

- 6.20 The Task Group also felt that consideration should be given to improving the layout of the website, so that navigation menus are available at all times (i.e. through use of a mega-menu), and also to improving navigation via mobile phone. Also, it is considered that customer journeys via the Council's website could be optimised to shorten the number of interactions.
- 6.21 A number of potential improvements were identified in relation to the 'report a problem' function to:
- show issues that have already been reported;
 - make it more intuitive for customers to select the correct option;
 - provide help buttons that customers can click on to access additional information;
 - improve postcode searches so they return all related address points;
 - address mapping glitches with locations being erroneously shown as out of district;
 - allow photos to be attached to reports,
 - allow customers to provide updates to existing reports;
 - provide status updates for reported issues.
- 6.22 It is noted that many of these improvements are in the process of being made, which is welcomed.
- 6.23 It may also be helpful to undertake some customer workshops to see if the page can be made easier for customers to use.
- 6.24 The Task Group suggested that all elected Members should be encouraged to regularly promote the 'report a problem' tool through local newsletters and magazines.
- 6.25 Further integration of third-party applications within the 'My Account' system would help to eliminate the need for multiple logins. Ideally, all existing logins should be identified and programmed for inclusion where OpenID login functionality is supported.

- 6.26 The functionality of the Chatbot could be expanded, so it can deal more effectively with a wider range of standard queries. The Contact Centre should be consulted to identify the most common queries.
- 6.27 All new IT systems should be rigorously tested to ensure they are not released with bugs, with sign-off required by service leads.

Provision for Disabled Customers

- 6.28 The need for BSL interpretation of Council meetings should be reviewed once further guidance has been issued in 2023.
- 6.29 Consideration should be given to producing BSL videos about Council services and easy read versions of key documents to make them accessible to as wide a range of customers as possible.
- 6.30 Consideration should be given to what further changes need to be made for engaging and supporting disabled customers once the current Equality Diversion and Inclusion work stream has been completed.

Customer Service Standards and Training

- 6.31 Consideration should be given to reviewing the remit of the Customer First Programme Board. Members felt that this should be more strategic and high profile, and should be driving customer service improvements across the Council.
- 6.32 Members also supported development of a Customer Service Charter that clearly sets out the standards that the Council will deliver. This should be clearly displayed on the website and in Council offices so that customers know the standards that they can expect to receive. Training should be provided to ensure that all staff are aware of the Charter and how to best meet the needs of the customer.

7 Other options considered

None at this stage – the report sets out the Task Group's initial findings, which will be refined and worked up in more detail for the final report in March 2023.

8 Conclusion

- 8.1 The initial findings outlined above have been agreed by the Task Group and relate to the aspects of the review completed to date, based on evidence presented. It is considered that these would help to improve various aspects of the customer journey, but it is recognised that there would be financial and resource implications.

Further Work

- 8.2 Further recommendations will be made as part of the Task Group's final report, which will be presented to OSMC in March 2023. Over the intervening period, the Task Group will be undertaking further interviews with those individual services that have high numbers of customer contacts and / or complaints and / or low levels of customer satisfaction. The Task Group will also be looking at best practice case studies.

Lessons Learned

- 8.3 The Task Group has also taken this opportunity to reflect on the experience of conducting the review and to identify lessons learned that could be applied to future reviews.
- 8.4 The key lesson is that the scope of the review was too ambitious and wide-ranging. As a result, the timescale for the review had to be extended twice, which had implications for the delivery of other Task and Finish Group reviews that OSMC had programmed for the remainder of 2022/23.
- 8.5 It would have been helpful at the outset for the Task and Finish Group to have been made aware of existing parallel groups, such as the Customer First Programme Board, and relevant pieces of work such as the Place Review, since that may have helped to avoid duplication of effort and improve work programming. Knowledge of the work of the Customer First Programme Board would have helped the Task Group to have more tightly defined its focus and directed its attention.
- 8.6 Best practice suggests that reviews by Task and Finish Groups should be completed within six meetings or less. However, where a review is found to be taking much longer than expected, it would be reasonable to have a break point (e.g. after 6 months) and report on the elements of the review undertaken to that point. This would provide an opportunity for the Task Group to take direction from OSMC.

9 Appendices

Appendix A – Customer Journey Task and Finish Group Terms of Reference

Appendix B – Emergency Out of Hours Contact Centre Call Handling Statistics

Appendix C – Contact Centre Statistics

Appendix D – Member Survey Results

Background Papers:

['Customer Journey – Out of Hours', Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission, 24 May 2022.](#)

Subject to Call-In:

Yes: ☐ No: ☒

The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval ☐

Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council ☐

Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position	<input type="checkbox"/>
Considered or reviewed by Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee or associated Task Groups within preceding six months	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Item is Urgent Key Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Report is to note only	<input type="checkbox"/>

Wards affected: All wards

Officer details:

Name: Gordon Oliver
Job Title: Principal Policy Officer
Tel No: 01635 519486
E-mail: gordon.oliver1@westberks.gov.uk

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Version	Date	Description	Change ID
1	26/10/22	Draft version for Customer Journey Task and Finish Group	1.0
1	02/11/22	Updated draft for Task Group Review	1.1
1	07/11/22	Updated draft responding to officer feedback	1.2
2	08/11/22	Version for Corporate Board	2.0
3	18/11/22	Final Version for ISMC	3.0