



Report to: Cabinet Meeting - 20 February 2024

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Paul Peacock, Strategy, Performance & Finance

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Report Summary	
Type of Report	Open Report, Key Decision
Report Title	Customer Experience Strategy: Pilot Opening Hours & Customer Promise Feedback Results
Purpose of Report	To seek Cabinet’s approval on opening hours within the Customer Contact Centre and Housing Repairs based on the results of the pilot. As well as to share the results of feedback received on the Customer Promise.
Recommendations	It is recommended that Cabinet: a) approve the recommendation to resume the Council’s opening hours of 9:00am - 5:00pm within the Customer Contact Centre and Housing Repairs; and b) note the results of customer feedback about the Customer Promise, formally adopt the Promise and embed it in the Council.
Alternative Options Considered	The alternative option considered based on the results of the opening hours pilot was to adopt the extended opening hours permanently.
Reason for Recommendations	This aim of this pilot was to understand whether the extra opening hour supported customers who may have work or personal commitments during the opening hours of the Council, to get in touch with an advisor when they would have otherwise not have been able to.

1.0 **Background**

1.1 **Pilot Opening Hours**

- 1.1.1 In the 2022 Resident Survey, residents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the Council as well as give specific feedback on areas of improvement. A key area of improvement identified was Council Communication. As a result of this, the Policy & Performance Improvement Committee (PPIC) set-up a working group to develop a Customer Experience Strategy to improve the quality and consistency of customer experience. Looking at elements such as how customers get in touch, how enquiries are handled and how the Council constantly improves its customer service and learns from customer feedback. The working group reviewed the opening hours of our Customer Contact Centre, considering whether the opening hours of our non-digital services are suitable for all of our customers. For example, customers who work full time or work nightshifts may not be able to contact us between 9am and 5pm. Therefore, to meet the needs of these customers, the working group proposed piloting additional opening hours. This report is a review of the results of the pilot, if the pilot is found to be successful, the additional opening hour may be made permanent.
- 1.1.2 Prior to commencement of the pilot, a range of contacts methods were and continue to be available, to allow customers to choose the method which best suits their needs. These methods include:
- **Telephone and Webchat**
 - **Email and Online** – A range of self-serve services are available online 24/7, with customers able to complete a range of payments, reporting and applications
 - **In person** – at both Castle House and Ollerton Advice Office
 - **24/7 emergency repairs within tenanted properties** – If there is immediate danger to the safety of a tenant or that of their property, this is considered an emergency and should be reported without delay.
- 1.1.3 PPIC unanimously voted to implement the proposed pilot opening hours from 8-9am on a Monday, this was informed by call volumes and the proposal was subsequently approved by Cabinet. The additional opening hour has been within the Customer Contact Centre and Housing Repairs, with customers able to contact by phone, e-mail, social media, and webchat.
- 1.1.4 The pilot ran for 15 weeks, between 4 September – 18 December. Feedback as to why the customer was contacting us between 8-9am was captured during the first 12 weeks, after which only call volumes were monitored until the end of the pilot. This report references both the 12-week period in which feedback and call volumes were captured, as well as the 3-week period in which only call volumes were monitored.
- 1.1.5 The extended opening hours have been in operation within the Customer Contact Centre and Housing Repairs between 8-9am on Monday mornings. This required 3 colleagues within the Customer Contact Centre and 2 colleagues within Housing Repairs working additional hours to facilitate this. When customers have contacted the Council during the additional opening hour, colleagues have been capturing information from the customer to understand the benefit of the additional opening hour, allowing the results of this pilot to help determine whether this format is really helping us better meet the needs of as many customers as possible.

- 1.1.6 The pilot opening hours were promoted using a variety of methods, both on and offline. Posters were displayed in key customer facing locations, such as the reception of Castle House and the Ollerton office. The Council website was updated to reflect the extended opening hours, as well as scheduled social media posts. Additionally, posters were issued to Parish Councils to display in prominent locations.
- 1.1.7 It should be noted that a major incident was declared throughout the district on 19 October 2023, due to floods impacting on the lives of many residents throughout the district which may have contributed to peaks in call volumes from 23 October onwards. The autumn half term holidays for schools within the district was also observed during this period, during weeks commencing 23 and 30 October, this may have been an influential factor as to why call volumes peaked during week commencing 6 November within the Customer Contact centre.
- 1.1.8 The results of the pilot and recommendation to resume the Councils opening hours within the Customer Contact Centre and Housing Repairs was presented to the Policy and Performance Improvement Committee on 29 January 2024. This Committee approved that the report and recommendations were considered by the Cabinet.

1.2 Customer Promise Feedback

- 1.2.1 In response to the Resident Survey 2022 Consultation, Residents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the Council and given the opportunity to provide specific feedback for areas of improvement. 919 comments were received, of which 28% were dissatisfied with Council Communication. As a result of this, PPIC requested that a working group be formed to develop a Customer Experience Strategy. Formed in September 2022, the working group met 3 times to look at various aspects including customer data, case studies, processes and what good customer service looks like. The working group also identified some minor improvements to the website that have now been implemented.
- 1.2.2 As a result of the working group meetings, a Customer Promise document was designed. The Customer Promise is a customer facing document which highlights the behaviour the Council will follow when interacting with customers. The Customer Promise has been designed with the target audience in mind, it is a document which will be used to deliver the message of the Customer Experience Strategy in an impactful and easily digestible format.
- 1.2.3 The Customer Promise was displayed for a period of four weeks in 3 key customer facing locations, Castle House, Ollerton Advice Office and the Palace Theatre. Suggestion cards were available alongside the Customer Promise in all three locations, with customers able to provide their feedback on the promises set out in the document to understand whether it describes what our customers want and need when interacting with the Council. This approach was decided to be the most appropriate method of interacting with customers, at a time when there were several non-related consultations live.
- 1.2.4 Customers were also asked if they had any other comments or suggestions on how the Customer Promise could be improved.

2.0 Proposal/Details of Options Considered

2.1 Pilot Opening Hours

2.1.1 307 calls were received between 8-9am from 4 September 2023 – 18 December 2023 between both the Customer Contact Centre and Housing Repairs. 259 of those calls were answered during the initial 12 weeks of the pilot, during which each caller was asked if they would be willing to answer two questions:

- Is there a reason why calling before 9am is more convenient for you and if so, the reason why?
- If we were not open at this time, how would you have contacted the Council?

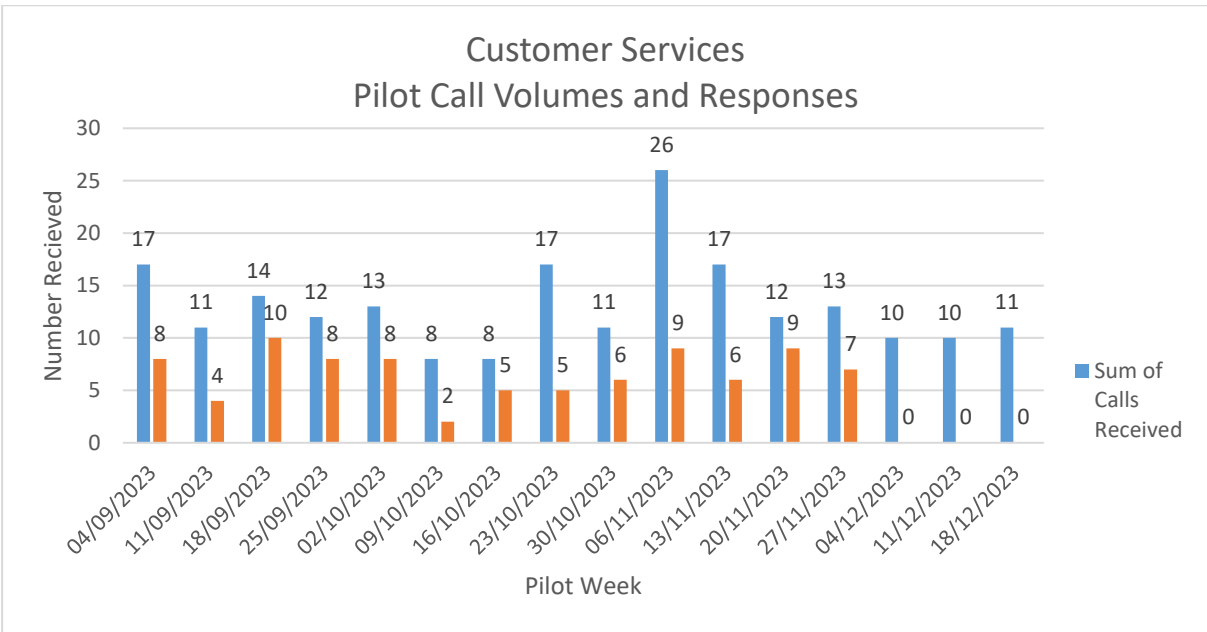
2.1.2 During the pilot, the alternative range of ways in which customers could get in touch with the Council remained available. These options include by telephone, webchat, email, online, in person, 24/7 online repairs and by telephone for emergency housing repairs. The range of options available means that customers can get in touch at a time that suits them, even if this is outside of our opening hours.

2.1.3 The Customer Contact Centre received an average of 13 calls on Monday mornings between 8-9am during the pilot period. During the same period, the Customer Contact Centre received an average of 420 calls per day of the pilot and as such we know that 3.1% of the days total calls were being received between 8-9am.

2.1.4 Housing Repairs received an average of 6 calls on Monday mornings been 8-9am during the pilot period. During the same period, Housing Repairs received an average of 132 calls per day of the pilot and as such we know that 4.55% of the days total calls were being received between 8-9am.

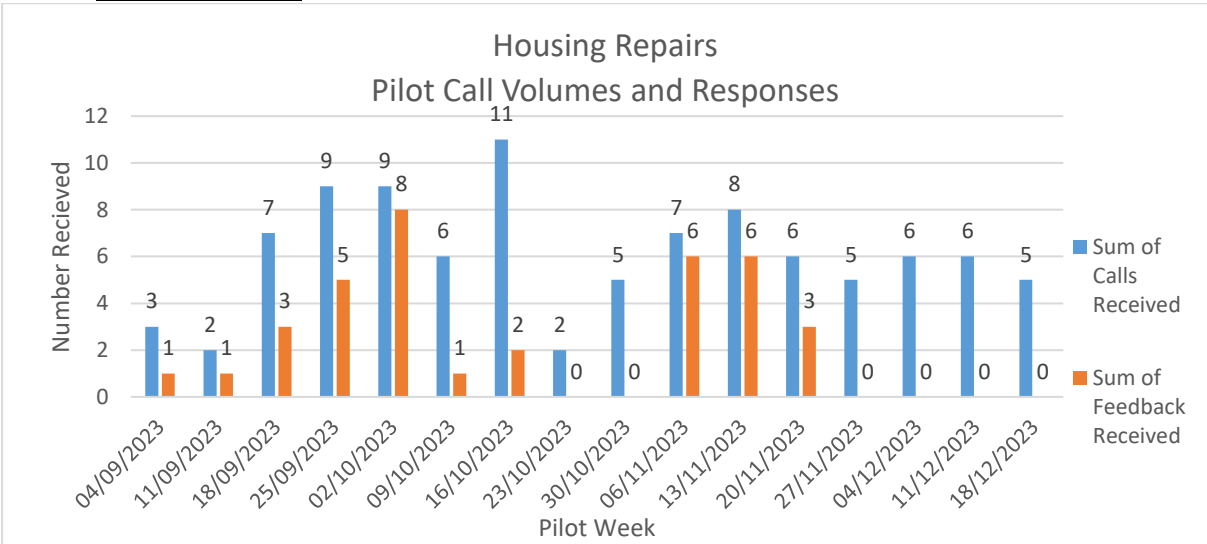
2.1.5 It should be noted that an average of 39% of total calls received into the Customer Contact Centre and Housing Repairs during the pilot opening hour were between 8:45-9:00am.

Customer Services



- 2.1.6 Within the Customer Contact Centre, 179 calls were answered during the first 12 weeks of the pilot, with an additional 31 calls answered during the pilot wind down period, totalling 210 calls across the 15-week period. Of the 179 calls answered during the first 12 weeks, 87 callers provided feedback.
- 2.1.7 Of the 87 callers who provided feedback, 53 callers (61%) explained that calling before 9am is more convenient for their individual circumstances. The most common reason for this was due to work or other personal circumstances, such as childcare or personal appointments. This was mentioned 37 times (70%) of those 53 callers who said it was more convenient for them. Whilst this is a large percentage of callers, the sample size of callers who provided feedback must be noted, and whilst it was mentioned 37 times this averages out to be just over 3 customers per week of the pilot.
- 2.1.8 Other reasons included needing to speak to an advisor to progress something, which was mentioned by 9 callers (17%), followed by callers who hoped calling at this time would mean the phone lines are less busy and the callers who called on the off chance as it was more convenient for them, both of these reasons were mentioned 6 times each (11% respectively). The breakdown of calls received between 08:45-9:00am during the pilot shows that on average 41% of all calls were received in this 15minute window. This may be indicative of the reasons shared by the callers surveyed, who explained that they were calling ahead to avoid busy phone lines. As such it could be assumed that no matter what time the phone lines open, there will be callers who wish to call ahead to avoid call waiting queues.
- 2.1.9 34 of the 87 callers during the pilot period (39%) explained that calling before 9am was not any more convenient for their individual circumstances. The most common reason for this was that the customer had called on the off chance, this was mentioned by 27 of the 34 callers (79%). This averaged out to just over 2.25 callers per week during the pilot. Other reasons included that the callers assumed the Council would already be open, this was mentioned by 7 callers (21%), followed by the callers who needed to speak to an advisor to progress something but that doing so wasn't any more convenient for them which was mentioned by 6 callers (18%).
- 2.1.10 All 87 callers who shared feedback during the 12-week pilot period were asked to share how they would have contacted the Council if the additional opening hour pilot was not currently in operation. Callers were able to select multiple channels as desired. 76 callers (87%) explained that they would have got in touch using the telephone at another time of day, 13 callers (15%) explained that they would've sent an email.

Housing Repairs



- 2.1.11 Within Housing Repairs, 80 calls were answered during the first 12 weeks of the pilot, with an additional 17 calls answered during the pilot wind down period, totalling 97 calls across the 15-week period. Of the 80 calls answered during the first 12 weeks, 36 callers provided feedback.
- 2.1.12 Of the 36 callers that provided feedback, 24 callers (67%) explained that calling before 9am is more convenient for their individual circumstances. The most common reason for this was due to having an emergency repair to report, this was mentioned by 13 (54%) of callers who said it was more convenient for them. If an emergency situation is being experienced by a tenant, whereby there is immediate danger to the safety of the tenant or that of their property, the reporting of this issue should not be delayed until the Council opens. Emergency repairs can be reported 24/7 on either the dedicated phone line or by using repairs online and should be reported immediately.
- 2.1.13 Other reasons included work or other personal circumstances, such as childcare or personal appointments which was mentioned by 9 (38%) of callers and 2 (8%) of callers who said it was more convenient for them as they were able to get a quicker response.
- 2.1.14 12 of the 36 callers during the pilot period (33%) explained that calling before 9am was not any more convenient for their individual circumstances. The most common reason for this was callers assumed the Council Offices would already be open, this was mentioned by 4 (33%) of those callers who said it was not any more convenient for them.
- 2.1.15 This was followed by callers who explained it was not any more convenient but they were aware that we were open and callers who said the time wasn't any more convenient but by calling earlier they hoped they would receive a quicker response, both of these reasons were mentioned by 3 (25%) callers each.
- 2.1.16 All 36 callers who shared feedback during the 12 week pilot period were asked to share how they would have contacted the Council if the additional opening hour pilot was not currently in operation. Callers were able to select multiple channels as desired. 33 callers (92%) explained that they would have got in touch using the telephone at another time of day. The only other method of contact chosen by the callers was email which was mentioned by 2 (6%) callers, 1 (2%) caller did not select any method of contact.
- 2.1.17 The two options considered as a result of this pilot were to:

(a) Adopt the extended opening hours

If adopted this would require consideration being given to how the extended opening hours are staffed. Based on the approach operated during the pilot, 3 members of staff would be working in the Customer Contact Centre and 2 members of staff in Housing Repairs. This would incur the cost implication of 5 members of staff working for 1 additional hour per week, which is outlined in section 4.1.1.

The alternative to this would be introducing a split shift system with the 5 members of staff outlined above, working an earlier shift pattern from 8am-4pm. Based on the volume of calls received between 8-9am, and the 8 week average volume of calls received throughout the day, it is likely that the volumes incoming are likely to be higher at any other point throughout the day. As such, if a split shift was introduced this would have the impact of reducing staffing resource at the end of the day which may impact negatively on call waiting times and number of calls answered.

The purpose of piloting extended opening hours was to understand whether this enabled us to better support those customers who may not be able to speak to an advisor between the a majority of the callers who provided feedback did tell us that it was more convenient for them to get in touch between 8-9am, 87% of callers into the Customer Contact Centre and 92% of callers into Housing repairs told us that if we were not open at this time, they would have used the telephone to get in contact with us.

Or

(b) Resume the current opening hours

If resumed, this option would have no financial implications outside of existing budgets. The hours and shift pattern worked would also remain unchanged. This would mean that the staffing resource would not be diluted and as such remain in place to serve customers throughout the day with the largest volume of incoming calls.

The data collected during the pilot shows that opening at 8am would not impact the way that most customers get in touch. As such, in order to be there for as many customers as possible, whilst not diluting the number of colleagues available, the Council can encourage the use of self-serve methods. The data collected during the pilot supports this, as when asked how customers would get in touch if we weren't open during the pilot hour, the most selected option after telephone, was email. Whilst not all customers will prefer or have access to digital means of contact, other out of hours, non-digital methods of contact remain, such as by letter.

- 2.1.18 **Based on the findings of the pilot the recommendation of this report is option b:** to resume the Councils opening hours of 9:00am – 5:00 pm. The data gathered during the pilot shows that the demand on the Customer Contact Centre and Housing Repairs between 8-9am is low in comparison to the volume of calls being received throughout the day, with 4% on average of the total calls for the day being received between 8-9am. Of those calls received between 8-9am, 39% on average were received in the final 15 minute window of the additional opening hour (8:45-9:00am). To adopt the extended opening hours formally, this would require permanent arrangements to be made to colleagues shift patterns which would have a financial impact or an impact on resource availability during the day when the call volumes are higher. The cost associated with this is outlined in section 4.1.1.

Within housing repairs, 54% of callers who said calling between 8-9am was more convenient, this was due to an emergency repair that needed to be reported. As such the pilot did not succeed in removing barriers for those customers to get in touch, however, has highlighted that some tenants may be waiting until we open to report emergency repairs. As such, the promotion of how to report an emergency repair via the dedicated 24/7 telephone line or by using the online repairs service could be considered.

The aim of this pilot was to understand whether we could better serve our customers, as such looked at removing potential barriers for customers getting in touch with us. The pilot has demonstrated that on the whole, the extended opening hours do not achieve this aim. As 87% of callers into the Customer Contact Centre and 92% of callers into Housing Repairs would've got in contact with us on the telephone irrespective of the pilot opening hours.

It is believed that this recommendation will concentrate our resource to ensure that colleagues are available for as many customers as possible during the busiest opening hours, whilst remaining dedicated to serving customers in the way that works best for them whether that be via the telephone, face to face or online.

2.2 Customer Promise Feedback

2.2.1 Customers were asked if they agreed that the promises set out within the Customer Promise describe what they want and need when interacting with the Council. 35 responses were received, 34 respondents agreed, 1 respondent disagreed and 0 respondents were unsure.

2.2.2 9 customers shared comments when asked if they had any comments or suggestions as to how the Customer Promise could be improved. All 9 of those comments were complimentary of the service that officers had and continue to provide. Due to the small number of comments, all 9 of these comments are included below.

Comments received
No, everyone I have dealt with has been efficient, friendly and really helpful at out time of loss. F2F or over the phone
No, we have had an excellent experience
Simply by following the kindness and professionalism shown by the officer that helped me today
Very good communication
No, very helpful
Keep up the good work
No comments, thank you for the great service
No problem officer very helpful
Officer was helpful today with advice towards my husband's cancer disability

2.2.3 Cabinet approved the Customer Promise in principle in July 2023, subject to public consultation. As outlined by the feedback above, the feedback from customers was overwhelmingly positive and as such it is recommended that Cabinet note the results of this feedback and embed the Customer Promise at the heart of our Customer Service ethos. As a result, the Customer Promise will be used to shape and influence future training developed for all customer facing staff.

3.0 **Implications**

In writing this report and in putting forward recommendations, officers have considered the following implications: Data Protection; Digital & Cyber Security; Equality & Diversity; Financial; Human Resources; Human Rights; Legal; Safeguarding & Sustainability and where appropriate they have made reference to these implications and added suitable expert comment where appropriate.

Financial Implications (FIN23-24/7657)

- 3.1 If the recommendations are approved the total budget required as detailed below and the increase to the establishment will need to be approved by Cabinet and included in the current budget setting process:

Description	FTE	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28
Customer Service Advisors (1 x additional hour per week)	3	2,876	3,079	3,295	3,526
Housing Repairs Advisors (1 x additional hour per week)	2	1,917	2,052	2,197	2,351
Total budget required		4,793	5,131	5,492	5,877

- 3.2 All posts have been assumed at the lowest salary grade (NS07 – 12) and all costs increase incrementally and include National Insurance and Superannuation.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

None.