

**Classification:** Private

**Key Decision:** No

## **Gravesham Borough Council**

**Report to:** Management Team  
and  
Community Services Cabinet Committee

**Date:** 19 February 2019

**Reporting officer:** 5 March 2019  
Jackie Denton (Customer Services Manager)  
Kirsty Gaunt (Community Involvement Officer)

**Subject:** Customer Service Update and Customer Engagement

### **Purpose and summary of report:**

To inform Members of the service provided by Customer Services and to report on how the council deals with customer engagement

### **Recommendations:**

1. This report is for information only

#### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 Following a discussion at the last Community Services Cabinet Committee on 26 November 2018 it was proposed that a report be produced looking at how we ensure the council is providing customer satisfaction. This report looks at the service we currently deliver.
- 1.2 This report provides detailed data collated and used for performance monitoring supplemented by surveys with our telephone and Gateway customers to understand more about our customers, how they contact us and why.

#### **2. Who are our customers**

- 2.1 There is no one set of data that provides a complete profile of who contacts the council so for the purposes of this report we have drawn on ONS Mid-Year Estimates and Gravesham BC data.
- 2.2 As at mid-2017, Gravesham's population was 106,100. Much of the population will be users of council services and therefore customers but will not necessarily contact the council.
- 2.3 Gravesham BC provides 5,680 council properties with 13.2% of all housing in the borough classed as social housing.

2.4 The ONS 2016 Mid-year estimates provide a breakdown of the local population by age.

**Population by age group, Mid 2016 - Gravesham**

*Source: ONS Mid Year Estimates*

|            | Total Persons |                       |
|------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Gravesham  | No.           | % of total population |
| All People | 106,800       | 100%                  |
| 0-15       | 22,200        | 20.8%                 |
| 16-64      | 66,400        | 62.1%                 |
| 65+        | 18,300        | 17.1%                 |

The average age of a Gravesham resident in mid-2016 was 38.4 for males and 39.8 for females. This compares to a national average of 38.9 for males and 40.9 for females.

2.5 In 2018 90% of households had access to the internet with 86% of adults using the internet daily.

2.6 The council's Customer Service and Access Strategy identify four customer groups.

- High Interactive, for example, housing tenants or benefit claimants, who have regular contact with the council.
- Casual interactive, for example, customers who contact the council a couple of times a year to clarify information or request a one-off service such as a bulky waste collection
- Low interactive, for example, customers who do not need to contact the council because they have no need, such as those who utilise direct debit facilities for payment of council tax and source information such as changes to refuse collections online.
- Business customers, for example, those who trade within the Borough, are looking to relocate or set up a new business, or those who provide goods and services to the council

### 3. Customer Services and what we do

3.1 Customer Services covers a number of areas:

- Telephone contact centre - which handles a range of enquiries including parking, housing allocations, waste management and council tax. Officers also answer webchats, respond to general email enquiries or forward emails to relevant departments
- Gravesham Gateway – the main customer interface and reception area including Meet and Greet, self-help and planning enquiries. This is also where Gateway partners are based
- Customer Services Help Desk – handling a range of enquiries and copying of evidence for departments

- Tourist Information point at market – handling a range of enquiries

3.2 The Gateway is a partnership arrangement with Kent County Council. It provides customers with access to a wide range of public and voluntary services under one roof. We currently host a variety of external organisations including CAB, Shaw Trust, Pensionwise, Carers First, Victim Support, Centra, HMRC and Bailiffs, all offering customers support and advice. We are in the process of doing some publicity to attract new organisations to the Gateway to improve on the service offer.

We also host a number of internal departments including Housing Needs, Benefits and a Welfare Reform Officer who deals primarily with customers from Eastern European countries. The Gateway is also used for Debt Surgeries and Allocations Surgeries.

We have an internal interpreting scheme should anyone need assistance in a different language.

During February each year a customer satisfaction survey takes place across Kent Gateways and this information feeds into the Gateway Managers network meetings as well as reviews of the Customer Service Access Strategy to ensure our focus is still relevant in terms of the service we deliver.

#### 4. Options for contacting the council

4.1 Customers are able to contact the council by either visiting in person, using digital services (on-line), telephone or webchat. We also have an automated service if the customer knows the person/department they wish to speak to. Data is collated for all of these options, monitored and reported to Management.

The PIs reported cover the Customer Services theme of “Quality frontline services delivered on time and to the right people” and are:

- PI 46 Number of telephone calls to the contact centre
- PI 47 Number of Customer Services assisted self-serve transactions

4.2 We are in a digital world and are increasingly able to offer our services on-line enabling customer access 24/7. From feedback this is a service customers often prefer if they are working during council opening times. Webchat is also popular amongst working customers who may not have easy access to make a telephone call during the day but can discretely use Webchat. Both these options are available should the phone lines be busy.

Face to face is the most expensive means of contact, followed by telephone and then the most cost effective method of contact is using our on-line services. And so, whenever possible, officers encourage customers to use our on-line services.

#### 5. Call Volumes

5.1 Contact Centre: Below shows a breakdown of the total number of calls offered to the Contact Centre per year since 2010. In the past we haven't had a clear view on council tax call volumes and so we decided that from August 2017 we would separate those calls so we can identify the number

of calls following reminders and summonses being sent out. This also helps us manage resources as we can estimate the times when there might be an increase in call volumes. You can see below in brackets the percentage of calls offered which related to Council Tax. This is only an estimate as some customers come through on the main line despite wanting to discuss council tax.

|           | 10 - 11 | 11 -12 | 12 - 13 | 13-14 | 14-15 | 15-16 | 16-17 | 17-18          | 18-19          |
|-----------|---------|--------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----------------|----------------|
| April     | 8000    | 7290   | 9362    | 14350 | 11909 | 9771  | 8931  | 8310           | 10442 (24% CT) |
| May       | 6695    | 7565   | 10355   | 11492 | 11219 | 8862  | 9755  | 9965           | 11686 (17% CT) |
| June      | 6639    | 7010   | 9879    | 9823  | 15197 | 9690  | 11988 | 13434          | 10999 (17% CT) |
| July      | 6818    | 6818   | 11002   | 10939 | 18004 | 10176 | 9484  | 12801          | 10419 (19% CT) |
| August    | 6219    | 8263   | 9110    | 10349 | 11544 | 8083  | 9003  | 9854 (16% CT)  | 10181 (21% CT) |
| September | 6407    | 9995   | 8783    | 11577 | 11272 | 9234  | 9364  | 10122 (25%CT)  | 9637 (23% CT)  |
| October   | 5905    | 8836   | 9823    | 11398 | 10919 | 8185  | 8216  | 8680 (21% CT)  | 9269 (24% CT)  |
| November  | 6101    | 8529   | 9349    | 9912  | 8373  | 8271  | 8202  | 8188 (24% CT)  | 7818 (25% CT)  |
| December  | 4977    | 7685   | 6729    | 7989  | 7376  | 6745  | 5724  | 5695 (23% CT)  | 5323 (31% CT)  |
| January   | 6355    | 9764   | 9372    | 12455 | 9332  | 8572  | 8960  | 9285 (22% CT)  | 8954 (29% CT)  |
| February  | 7712    | 9134   | 9981    | 9525  | 8467  | 7469  | 7460  | 7640 (24% CT)  |                |
| March     | 9700    | 10742  | 11983   | 13952 | 10544 | 9355  | 10789 | 10791 (14% CT) |                |

## 6. Reasons for call volumes

- 6.1 Volume of calls are very similar year on year despite the number of on-line forms now being completed. We know that many of our customers are happy to use our on-line services but for some queries some customers feel more reassured by actually talking to an officer and this is particularly evident with council tax queries which are often complex.
- 6.2 Call volumes vary depending on events/service changes happening within the council or within the borough and we see a rise in call volumes for a number of reasons such as when we have inclement weather which may be affecting services; when we rolled out the new bins; when Pepperhill Tip was closed. As we near the end of the financial year we often see an increase in calls as customers are checking their council tax balances and enquiring what their council tax will be for the next year.
- 6.3 We have recently started collecting statistics on the types of calls being received which don't result in a service request form being completed and this can be seen on Appendix 2 attached. This demonstrates the variety of queries being received and gives us a clear understanding of why customers are calling us.

## 7. On-line forms

- 7.1 Below are the number of forms completed on-line by customers from April 2018 to January 2019 and the number of forms completed by Customer Service Officers on behalf of customers who have called the Contact Centre. Appendix 3 attached shows the detail of the types of forms completed by the customer and those completed by Customer Services (information provided by the Digital Team).

|                        | April | May  | June | July | Aug  | Sept | Oct  | Nov  | Dec  | Jan  |
|------------------------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <b>Customer (Self)</b> | 2595  | 3387 | 3165 | 2744 | 2633 | 2422 | 2267 | 1912 | 1513 | 2177 |
| <b>CSO</b>             | 946   | 1589 | 1637 | 1349 | 1231 | 982  | 1033 | 906  | 646  | 955  |

7.2 The on-line forms continue to be a popular method of contact as customers are able to complete an on-line form 24/7. However the statistics above show that there is still a high number of customers who still contact Customer Services to submit a service form on their behalf. This can be for a variety of reasons i.e. they don't have the equipment/knowledge to complete on-line forms; they prefer to speak to someone or they may not realise there are on-line forms particularly as Customer Services continue to work closely with the Digital Team identifying opportunities for new forms to be produced for the website. Customer Service Officers try to educate customers in the alternative methods of contact.

## 8. Webchats

8.1 We haven't seen a high usage of Webchat but it is useful for quick questions and for directing customers to a particular part of the website where they can get further information. Webchat isn't suitable for more complex queries such as council tax and the customer is asked to call the contact centre. Customers will try Webchat when the phone lines are busy..

| 2018/19  | April | May | June | July | Aug | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan |
|----------|-------|-----|------|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Webchats | 237   | 268 | 233  | 153  | 127 | 83   | 99  | 127 | 93  | 82  |

## 9. Visitors

9.1 We receive on average 3,500 visitors to the civic centre each month. There are a number of reasons for visiting including seeing Benefits Advisors to complete a new application; an appointment with Customer Services to provide evidence for copying, assistance with council tax enquiries, parking enquiries and a number of other requests; meeting Housing Officers; meeting Gateway partners; visiting Departments. Due to a change in the Homeless Act the council has seen an increase in customers presenting themselves as homeless to the Housing Needs Team in the last year.

9.2 Customers also visit the council to make payments and have the option to make cash payments at the Kiosk or card payment on the new iPads. Payments can also be made via the website or on the payment line from any location.

## 10. Survey Data

10.1 For the purposes of this report brief surveys were carried out with customers contacting the council by phone or visiting the Gateway.

- 10.2 Gateway: Over a period of two weeks a total of 62 face to face surveys with Gateway customers were completed – see Appendix 4.
- 10.3 Telephone: Over the same period a total of 96 customers took part in the telephone survey. Questions included satisfaction with speed call was answered, officer's knowledge and ability to fully answer query, overall satisfaction, service called about, reason for preference of calling.

## 11. Analysis

### 11.1 Gateway results

For those visiting the Gateway the most popular frequency is twice a year followed by monthly.

Housing and council tax are the service areas responsible for most visits to the Gateway.

Visiting the offices followed by the telephone were the most popular methods for contacting the council. When asked why, most responded that it was their preferred option.

When asked if they could have completed the task on-line, most replied no. For those that could have completed the task on-line a popular reason for still visiting the council in person was that they like to speak to someone. If they couldn't complete the task on-line a popular response was that they had to bring in documents or that they were not confident in their computing abilities.

In summarising the general comments on contacting the council, 13 comments were that they prefer speaking with a person, a further 7 replied that they were more able to communicate effectively in person and that they found it reassuring.

78% of those who answered identified as not being disabled with 22% responding that they did have a disability. There are no single Gravesham statistics for measuring levels of disability within the local population. There are statistics for numbers of people within Gravesham claiming DLA for 2011 of 7.1% which would indicate that the proportion of Gateway visitors with a disability is higher than the population in general. The most common types of disability identified were physical and mental health condition.

Those surveyed were also asked to identify their main language. English was the predominant response. Two individuals were attending the Gateway with relatives to act as interpreter. This information has to be treated with some caution as there were some customers who said no to answering the survey because of their lack of English.

### 11.2 Telephone survey results

51% of customers were calling to discuss council tax as they had received a reminder or summons. These calls can be quite complex and so it is important that the customer speaks to us, some prefer to call, some prefer to come and see an advisor face to face, it's individual preference.

27% of customers were calling about a Waste Management issue, either to book a bulky collection, checking bin days, ordering new bins, reporting abandoned vehicles, reporting graffiti, all of which could be done on-line.

Other calls were regarding parking, change of address, environmental health, clinical waste, again all of which could be done on-line.

30% of customers find it easier to call rather than coming in to the civic as they don't drive or just don't come into town very often or don't want to sit and wait for an advisor.

32% of customers prefer to speak to someone either on the phone or face to face as they feel reassured that their issue is being dealt with rather than completing a form and not knowing where it goes.

86% of customers were very satisfied with the officer's knowledge.

47% of customers said their main language was English.

## 12. **Summary**

12.1 The telephone data collected monthly and the data from this small sample of telephone and visitor surveys confirm our understanding of why customers choose a particular method of contact.

12.2 As outlined in 2.6 above, we know from experience that many residents will have low levels of contact with the council and some residents will not contact the council at all. These customers will use our on-line services, pay by Direct Debit, use e-billing etc.

We also know that the customers that contact us more frequently are likely to be housing tenants and/or benefit claimants and who are often in rent or council tax arrears. This is not age specific as we see and speak on the phone to customers of all ages experiencing difficulties.

12.3 Despite the digital agenda we ensure that customers continue to have a variety of options to contact the council and whilst we try to direct customers to the most cost effective way, which is on-line, customers always have the option to speak on the phone or meet an advisor. We are aware that for some queries such as council tax customers prefer to speak to someone as they find it easier to express themselves and they feel reassured that their query is being dealt with immediately. It can also depend on their locality so if a customer lives close to the town they are more likely to walk into the civic. And some customers aren't confident using digital methods and will always prefer to speak to someone.

12.4 Customer Services works closely with the Digital Team to identify ways to improve service delivery. We are currently looking at self-scanning so customers will have the option to scan their own documents for evidence either on iPads at the civic or using their own pc/mobile device. This will free up considerable officer time to assist those requiring more assistance. Self-scanning is already being used in a number of local authorities across Kent and works well.

- 12.5 The Revenues Team will shortly be launching Citizens Access and it is anticipated this will result in a decrease in call volumes. Again this will free up officer time for our more vulnerable customers. Citizens Access will enable customers to have more control over their council tax account on-line, so they will be able to check balances, set up Direct Debits, check progress etc.
- 12.6 As services within the council continue to change we continue to monitor customer satisfaction using a number of methods i.e. annual Gateway face to face surveys and from regular telephone surveys to ensure that customers are able to access services in ways to suit their needs. It is also anticipated that we will undertake some Mystery Shopping in the near future across Kent authorities as this hasn't been undertaken since 2014.

### **13. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 13.1 None

**IMPLICATIONS****APPENDIX 1**

This is an information only report with no financial implications.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Legal</b>                                       | None   |
| <b>Finance and Value for Money</b>                 | <b>Providing an effective and efficient front line service helps to reduce unnecessary contact and ensures customers receive the right level of service, information and advice. It is essential the council takes every opportunity to deal with customers promptly as many of the contacts relate to matters of a financial nature, for example council tax, which if not dealt with efficiently can escalate.</b> |
| <b>Risk Assessment</b>                             | N/a  |
| <b>Equality Impact Assessment</b>                  | <b>Screening for Equality Impacts</b>  |
|  | <b>Question</b>  |
|  | a. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper have potential to cause adverse impact or discriminate against different groups in the community? If yes, please explain answer.<br>No. Customer service is focused on ensuring all customers are able to access the service in the most appropriate way   |
|  | b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality? If yes, please explain answer.<br>The data informing the report provided an opportunity to find out more about our customers and their needs which have been incorporated into the recommendations   |
|  | <i>In submitting this report, the Chief Officer doing so is confirming that they have given due regard to the equality impacts of the decision being considered, as noted in the table above</i>   |
| <b>Corporate Plan</b>                              | <b>This work area falls under 04 Sound and self-sufficient council<br/>PI 146 Number of telephone calls into the contact centre<br/>PI147 Number of customer services assisted self-serve transactions</b>   |
| <b>Crime and Disorder</b>                          | <b>Customer Services support the recording and reporting of crime and disorder through reports received via the customer contact centre or reception areas.</b>  |
| <b>Digital and website implications</b>            | This report will feed into development of digital services.  |
| <b>Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults</b> | <b>Front line officers play a part in helping to identify vulnerable people and direct them to appropriate resources or reporting channels.</b>  |