

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
FINANCE, INNOVATION & PROPERTY ADVISORY BOARD

15 September 2021

Report of the Director of Central Services & Deputy Chief Executive

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Non-Key Decision (Decision may be taken by Cabinet Member)

1 CUSTOMER SERVICES – CORPORATE CALL CENTRE

This report asks Members to consider proposals for a corporate call centre, following the Call Centre Pilot that has been running since January 2020, helping deliver TMBC Digital Strategy and in line with the “One Council” theme

This will involve discussions with all Service areas, moving away from decentralised phone numbers, having these calls triaged through the corporate call centre / Bot, and understanding efficiency saving for each service area.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Still paramount to considering the establishment of the corporate call centre for TMBC, is to understand and satisfy the “*Customer need*”, which is front and centre of the call centre pilot, while structuring and assigning the resources within the Customer Services team, to enable TMBC in the delivery of high-quality customer service and aiming to support the delivery of the Council’s Digital Strategy.

1.1.2 The Pilot Call Centre - On the 21 January 2020 Management Team approved the proposals for a Pilot Call Centre. It was agreed that:

- **Phase 1** - to second the 2 vacant posts within the Revenues team into Customer Services
- **Phase 2** - Integrate the Kings Hill and Castle Customer Service teams within the Call Centre
- **Phase 3** - Move across Service area calls together with appropriately defined resources into the Call Centre. Staff consultations to take place for each service area

- 1.1.3 **Interim Gateway and Customer Services Manager** - At a subsequent meeting on 28 January 2020, Management Team also supported the appointment of the Gateway Manager, to the post of Interim Gateway and Customer Services Manager, in order to provide a consistent approach to managing Customer Services staff during the pilot phase and to oversee the call centre pilot. The duration of this appointment was initially until the 31 January 2021, this has since been extended until 31 October 2021.
- 1.1.4 **COVID-19** - a change in delivery of Customer Services was the result of lockdown, as restrictions created due to Coronavirus took effect. In line with other services, TMBC implemented an operational model of Customer Services working remotely from home, except for a small group working from Tonbridge Castle.
- 1.1.5 Due to the unforeseen operational trading environment created by COVID-19, we found that the pilot of the Call Centre Phases 1 and 2 took on a slightly different shape, from initially having two Customer Service advisors dealing with revenues calls only, to having the whole team working as one large Call Centre operation working remotely. This challenged all the individual Customer Service Advisors, who were assigned different level of tasks, depending on skill and competency, from Switchboard duty to all calls and Webchat.
- 1.1.6 The unique circumstances brought about by COVID-19 resulted in certain changes to phases of the pilot. The revised phasing then took the following shape-
1. Take Revenue calls
 2. All customer services advisors working remotely covering all calls on five queue work streams.
 - a. Switchboard calls (always managed switchboard)
 - b. Revenue Calls (from 24 March 2020)
 - c. Benefit Calls (from 16 June 2020)
 - d. Community Hub Calls (from 27 March 2020)
 - e. Housing (from 20 July 2020)
 - f. Private Sector Housing (from 15 February 2021)
 3. Integration of the Kings Hill and Castle Customer Service teams within the Call Centre
 4. Move across Service area calls together with appropriately defined resource into the Call Centre. Staff consultations to take place for each service area.
- 1.1.7 **Shaping Customer Services to adapt to ever-changing “Customer need”** has become a priority as a result of COVID-19, resulting in TMBC changing their delivery model.
- 1.1.8 For delivery of a service, it is irrelevant whether the Customer is external or internal, as it makes no difference to customer service delivery. The Customer does not

differentiate between different Directorates or individual service areas, they see one council delivering their services and needs.

One number contact for the public

- 1.1.9 In line with the digital strategy, it is proposed that the authority will move to a one number contact methodology for the public. All calls will feed through the one number and into our switchboard as opposed to being disseminated to back offices and individual officers direct as is the case currently. This practice also supports the Call Centre pilot, whereby all customer contact is initially handled, (and predominantly resolved) by customer services staff as opposed to taking up valuable case officer time. Whilst we can embed technology into our switchboard, such as IVR, AI (Artificial Intelligence) etc, this strategy will ultimately increase call flows through switchboard and into the Customer Services team in the short term.
- 1.1.10 Ultimately this will provide back-office efficiencies as the services will not receive calls direct from the public.

Reducing the number of calls by using a BOT

- 1.1.11 A BOT (short for "robot") is a software program that operates on the Internet and performs repetitive tasks.
- 1.1.12 IT have worked exhaustively to find a suitable replacement for our current telephony within budget. This has been realised and agreed with a market leader for Call Centre telephony, one that is integrated with MS Teams and also can embed service improvements and agent performance monitoring for us from day one. The new telephony has been purchased with future proofing in mind so not only will it be performance management telephony for the Call Centre but also a system that we can drive service improvement, efficiency, and transformation through directly linking it with the Digital agenda.
- 1.1.13 To enable us to fully utilise the system's potential and our full digital strategy, additional technology is needed that sits outside the original scope of delivering only a telephony system. To deliver a 24/7 Artificial Intelligence (AI) system that can learn and answer queries for our residents without the need of a human agent we would need to purchase a BOT. This BOT is driven by AI and can answer up to 10,000 standard telephone queries a month releasing staff time to answer more technical questions for more complex queries. Standard questions such as: When is my bin collection? What is my council tax band? and more generic standard queries can be directed through the BOT. As this is driven by AI as we feed the BOT more data, the more we can utilise this to support our services. The BOT can also deliver webchat, currently our webchat is only available when advisors are working – i.e., Monday to Friday 09:00 hours until 17:00 hours and they juggle webchat between answering technical calls for example, however the BOT can therefore support our residents 24/7.

1.1.14 When we look at our digital strategy an AI BOT embedded into our telephony and website supporting those residents that wish to have a quick transaction with us, is imperative. This is not to say a BOT replaces our customer service team but embeds within it for those residents in our borough that are happy not to discuss directly with a member of staff but wish a quick transactional experience for their easy to deal with queries.

1.1.15 The realisation of this is that whilst we do need to make a purchase and increase our expenditure by 20k per annum (this costing was provided by Head of IT), the technology will afford us future savings in time and resource along with delivering a 24/7 service to our residents.

1.2 Engagement with Service Managers

1.2.1 The focus of the discussions with Service Managers thus far has been:

- With all incoming calls proposed to go through main switchboard (Moving away from decentralised numbers), we need to understand what incoming calls are proposed to be going straight to each Service areas, and understand why these calls cannot be triaged through the call centre / Bot?
- Understand efficiency savings for each Service area when digital processes are in place (Bot / forms etc), and what full-time equivalent (FTE) savings for each Service area can be transferred to the Call Centre.
- Understand the timeline for the realisation of each efficiency saving, streamlining the customer journey, and identified resource from each Service area.
- With a Senior Financial Officer being part of these meetings, they will be assessing the potential savings from each Service area, ensuring a consistent approach across all service areas.
- All identified efficiency savings will be assessed and confirmed by Management Team, prior to implementation.

1.2.2 Priority List

Priority	Service area
N/A	Revenue Calls
N/A	Benefits calls
1	Waste Services calls
2	Environmental Health (Environmental Protection) calls

Priority	Service area
3	Environmental Health (Food and Safety) calls
4	Parking Services calls
5	Housing calls
6	Private Sector Housing calls
7	Streetline calls
8	Planning calls
9	Building Control calls
10	Election Services calls
11	Licensing Services calls
12	Pest Control calls
13	Complaint calls

1.3 Legal Implications

1.3.1 None arising from this report.

1.4 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.4.1 The move to a corporate call centre has two objectives within our digital strategy: Firstly, to provide an efficient service to the public on the basis of the 'One Council' ethos, and secondly to achieve financial efficiencies in due course.

1.4.2 It is envisaged that expansion into 'Bot' technology will enhance the service to the public and should not lead to ongoing growth in budgets, but be funded from other efficiency savings.

1.5 Risk Management

1.5.1 If it is decided not to consolidate call handling into a corporate call centre, there is a risk that there will be inconsistent service offers to the public, with the public using many different phone numbers to contact the Council, which may lead to confusion over who to contact.

1.6 Equality Impact Assessment

1.6.1 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

1.7 Policy Considerations

1.7.1 Asset Management

1.7.2 Healthy Lifestyles

1.8 Recommendations

1.8.1 It is **RECOMMENDED** that the Corporate Call Centre model is adopted in principle following the success of the Call Centre Pilot subject to Management Team continuing to work towards ensuring that any costs are paid for through efficiency savings with the Council.

Background papers:

Nil

contact: Anthony Garnett
Laura Mason

Adrian Stanfield
Director of Central Services & Deputy Chief Executive