



Council name	COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	CABINET – 2 OCTOBER 2023
Subject	TELEPHONE CHANNEL ACCESS - TRIAL
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Clr Tony Dale – Cabinet Member for the Economy and Council Transformation Email: tony.dale@cotswold.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Jon Dearing – Assistant Director for Resident Services Email: jon.dearing@cotswold.gov.uk
Report Author	Michelle Clifford – Business Manager for Customer Experience Email: michelle.clifford@cotswold.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	The purpose of this report, in light of a continuous decline in demand, is to propose reduced telephone access hours to the public. This will allow focus to shift to digital channels, where demand is increasing and make the Council more efficient.
Annexes	None
Recommendation(s)	That Cabinet resolves to: <i>a) Agree the reduced telephone access hours, on a trial basis, with effect from Monday 16th October 2023 for a period of six months, and</i> <i>b) Receive a further report, detailing the findings and recommendations from the trial, to a Cabinet meeting early in May 2024.</i>
Corporate priorities	Delivering our services to the highest standard of service
Key Decision	NO, as the recommendations are in relation to a trial period.
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	All Internal Departments including agreeing bespoke arrangements for Housing, Dangerous Structures and Elections..



COTSWOLD
DISTRICT COUNCIL

	Members Customer Services Team
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 Over the last few years the Council has been introducing new digital channels and improving those that already existed. This activity coincided with the Covid pandemic, where people accepted the use of to use alternative service access channels as a result of national restrictions. The result is that a significant percentage of service requests continue to come through digital channels and this present as opportunity for the council to trial a reduction in the hours of opening for the customer contact centre.
- 1.2 This report makes proposals to better reflect the changing needs of customers and how they prefer to access Services; whilst still retaining telephone access for those that are less able to use digital services.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 In 2021 Resident Services restructured at the Business Manager level. One of the objectives of this change was allow for a Business Manager dedicated to improving the customer experience. The resultant post of Business Manager for Customer Experience is responsible for leading the Customer Service Teams, improving digital access, making processes customer focussed and improving performance.
- 2.2 This has led to the formation of a multi-skilled 'Channel Choice Team'. This Team has been working to implement/improve access to digital services. The Team have created and improved digital access around many processes with very high take up rates. Examples include Green Waste sign-up, Bulky Waste, Licensing Applications, Fly Tipping and Abandoned Vehicle reporting, Planning Validation and implementation of the 'Open Portal' where customers can self-serve in relation to Housing Benefit and Council Tax services. CDC now has almost 7,000 households signed up to the 'Open Portal'. This figure increases weekly and that take up will be accelerated as we introduce 'auto sign-up', creating a Portal account when other forms of digital enquiries are made. Digital renewal for Green Waste licences continue to increase year on year. 2023 renewal has a 90% digital take up.
- 2.3 Over the last three years the provision of more and improved digital customer access to services, coupled with the impact of the pandemic, has led to customers changing their service access habits.
- 2.4 The volume of calls (CDC and WODC combined) reduced by over 37058 between 2021 and 2022. During this period the volume of web forms utilised by customers has tripled to over 98000 across the three sites (CDC volume = over 33000). This shift of contact method continues into 2023 when, for the first time, digital access volumes exceed telephone access volumes in the first half of the year.



- 2.5** This report, therefore, recommends that the Council's resources are realigned to reflect the change in customer behaviour.
- 2.6** It is important to note that, due to system configuration, any changes to telephone access would need to be mirror across the two Councils (Cotswold District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council).

3. MAIN POINTS

- 3.1** As a result of the changing customer needs and the resultant shift from telephone contact to digital contact, the Customer Services Management Team have undertaken extensive analysis of the telephone data. As well as the significant call volume reductions, the data shows, on average:
- a) Telephone lines are busiest earlier in the day, with the busiest period being between 9am and 10am,
 - b) Based on the most recent data, call volumes reduce steadily throughout the day; with the last hour of the day volumes being only 45% of the first hour of the day,
 - c) Mondays and Tuesdays are the busiest days with Wednesdays seeing the least volume of calls throughout the average week, and
 - d) Wait times increase between 12pm and 2pm, as almost 50% of the workforce are taking a lunch break throughout that period.

The conclusions drawn from the increase in digital contact, provide an opportunity to trial a revision to the way the services are provided, namely:

- (a) Telephone access reductions should be in the afternoons when call volumes reduce, and
 - (b) Increasing and improving digital access is where resources should be focussed in the future.
- 3.2** What the data does not show is what the reaction of the customers will be. Based on the experiences of other organisations (public and private sector) it is anticipated that a reduction in telephone access times will result in a further shift to digital channels. In order to test this assumption it is recommended that we enter into the new arrangements as a trial and collect data on demand, waiting times, channel shift, customer satisfaction and customer complaints. This data will then inform a further report around whether the new telephone opening hours should be made permanent.
- 3.3** The data indicates demand falls after 2pm and the recommendation is therefore to close front and back office (i.e. All non-direct dial lines) telephone lines at 2pm every day. This uniform approach will make messaging more straightforward and should improve recruitment opportunities; making posts more attractive to those that need to work around school hours. It will also mean resources can be maximised during the (12pm to 2pm) lunch period.



3.4 The intention is that the Out of Hours Service will not change and still commence at 5pm every day. The cost of providing an external Out of Hours service from 2pm every day would outweigh the financial savings and therefore hamper our ability to deliver on our customers' digital access needs. However, there are three services that will need 2pm to 5pm cover. They are:

- Reporting of dangerous structures (and other life threatening events). These are very rare but do need cover,
- Assisting those who are presenting as homeless or are under the threat of homelessness, and
- Support for residents in the lead-up to an election.

The first two of these are year-round requirements and will be resolved by introducing an in-house emergency line between 2pm and 5pm. The use of this line will be closely managed to ensure that non-urgent contacts do not take up this resource.

The election issue will be addressed by a separate (temporary) telephone line that will only be available and resourced in the lead-up to an election (Precise timings to be agreed with the Returning Officer and Elections Services Manager). The Customer Service Managers will meet with Elections Teams to draw up a plan specific to each election but resources can be sourced at very short notice for this task, or any emergency event, and the mechanism for this is explained in 3.6 below.

When customers attempt to telephone after 2pm they will be advised of the new opening hours and given information on how to access services on-line. They will also be given information on what to do in an emergency. For non-emergency matters other channels, such as face to face, email and the wide range of digital services will be available as normal.

3.5 The implementation of these changes will clearly require a reduction in working hours for some of the Customer Service Officers (some Officers will continue full time as Managers, Reception, Front Office and some technical Officers will be required all day). There has been a commitment to effect this change without any mandatory redundancies and there are three key ways in which this will be achieved:

- i. Where an officer wishes to voluntarily reduce their hours, this will be agreed,
- ii. Where a vacancy occurs, recruitment to the post will be made for 9am to 2pm, and
- iii. When future 'back office' vacancies arise, opportunities will be considered to assess how these roles could be filled by customer services staff (where appropriate) with the 2pm to 5pm Customer Service Officer resource. The approach described in bullet point iii (above) has several advantages:
 - Minimises risk of the need to make any redundancies,
 - There will be improved customer focus in the back office,
 - The Customer Service officers will improve their technical knowledge, and



- Customer Service resources can be seconded (full-time) back in the Telephone Service should they be required. This would mean a temporary reduction in back office capacity but as the back office Services will have gained some capacity from reducing direct telephone access 2pm-5pm, this should more than balance that capacity issue.

- 3.6** During the trial period the excess hours within the Customer Service Team will be used to help other Services reduce their outstanding workloads; in particular Revenues and Benefits and the Housing Service where demand is high as a result of the Cost of Living Crisis. This will reduce the need for customers to make repeat calls and therefore, further, reduce telephone call volumes.
- 3.7** This change is intended to meet the changing needs of our customers. No change to other access channels (including Face to Face) are being proposed. The Trinity Road and Moreton Area Centre receptions will be open 9am to 5pm as normal.
- 3.8** The recommendations propose that a further report be made in May 2024 with details of the outcomes the data collection exercise that will have taken place during the trial. This is the point at which the decision will be made as to whether the change is made permanent or not.
- 3.9** A Communications plan is being developed, so that customers are aware of the changes and the reasoning. This will include amendments to Web pages, documents and signage.
- 3.10** Based on the experiences of other organisations (public and private sector) a reduction in telephone access times is likely to result in a further shift to digital channels. In order to test this assumption the recommendation is to trial the new arrangements and during the trial collect data on elements such as demand, waiting times, continued uptake of channel choice to web based services customer satisfaction and customer complaints. This data will then inform a further report to assist in informing whether the new telephone opening hours should be made permanent.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1** Excluding the Managers and Face to Face Officers (mentioned above) each of the 30 Customer Service Officers across CDC and WODC (24.93 fte) will have a reduction in hours of 0.32 fte. This reduction across the 30 Officers equates to a total reduction of 7.98 fte. This makes the total efficiency saving £238,100 to be shared equally between CDC and WODC. So the total saving to CDC is £119,050 per annum.
- 4.2** The first £50,000 per annum of this will be delivered in 2023/24 and the remainder (£69,050 per annum) in 2024/25.
- 4.3** The Service has already started to fill vacancies on reduced hours and is holding some vacancies. This will allow the 2023/24 target to be met during the trial period.
- 4.4** As there will be no redundancies, the cost of implementation will be support service resources and will therefore fall within existing budgets.



5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no Legal implications associated with the recommendations.

6. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 6.1 There is a risk in not agreeing the recommendations, in that the Council would miss an opportunity to make services more efficient.
- 6.2 The reduction in telephone access opening hours could bring a reputational risk. However, the Council would be maintaining all forms of access and better meeting the changing needs of its customers.

7. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 7.1 No services or service access channels are being taken away, so the impact is minimal. An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed and shared with the Council's Director of Governance and Development (Monitoring Officer).
- 7.2 Encouraging a further shift to digital and self-serve channels will create more capacity for Teams to provide support to those customers in the greatest need.

8. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The recommendation does not have any climate change implications.

9. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 9.1 The Council could decide not to reduce the telephone opening hours. However, this would fail to recognise the customer shift to digital access channels and would miss an opportunity to evolve to reflect changing patterns of behaviour as well as generate savings.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1 None.

(END)