



INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT

FROM: Audit and Risk Manager
TO: Head of Digital & Customer Services
C.C.: Chief Executive
Deputy Chief Executive
Head of Finance
Benefits and Customer Services Manager
Portfolio Holder (Cllr Harrison)

SUBJECT: Customer Access Facilities
DATE: 3 September 2024

1 Introduction

- 1.1 In accordance with the Audit Plan for 2024/25, an examination of the above subject area has recently been completed by Emma Walker, Internal Auditor, and this report presents the findings and conclusions for information and, where appropriate, action.
- 1.2 Wherever possible, findings have been discussed with the staff involved in the procedures examined and their views are incorporated, where appropriate, into the report. My thanks are extended to all concerned for the help and cooperation received during the audit.

2 Background

- 2.1 The Customer Service Centre (CSC) deal with approximately 50,000 enquiries from members of the public per annum. As the front face of the Council, the CSC have a direct influence on the public's perception of the effectiveness and efficiency of Warwick District Council (WDC). Following the relocation of the Council offices, the CSC has been re-established in the reception of the Royal Pump Rooms, Leamington Spa.
- 2.2 At least 210,000 customers contacted the Council by telephone in 2023 and online forms accounted for 27,665 requests for the year.
- 2.3 It should be noted that the website was not considered under the scope of this audit as this is covered in the scope of the Website Management audit. A review of the Change Management Programme was, however, conducted, with a specific focus on the introduction of the new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system.
- 2.4 It should also be noted that the scope of this audit did not cover Council-wide customer access, but rather solely focused on customer access via the CSC. Certain service areas, such as Housing, provide their own customer services, but these were not examined under the scope of this particular audit.

3 **Objectives of the Audit and Coverage of Risks**

- 3.1 The management and financial controls in place have been assessed to provide assurance that the risks are being managed effectively. It should be noted that the risks stated in the report do not represent audit findings in themselves, but rather express the potential for a particular risk to occur. The findings detailed in each section following the stated risk confirm whether the risk is being controlled appropriately or whether there have been issues identified that need to be addressed.
- 3.2 In terms of scope, the audit covered the following risks:
1. Cost effectiveness of services cannot be demonstrated.
 2. Failure to comply with legislation and regulations surrounding customer service, e.g. GDPR / Consumer Rights Act 2015.
 3. Potential accessibility issues following relocation to the Pump Rooms.
 4. Services provided do not meet applicable standards and / or public expectations.
 5. Staff not provided with sufficient resources at new offices.
 6. Inaccurate, irrelevant, or inconsistent information / advice provided to customers.
 7. Staff not adequately trained / customer focused.
 8. Resources not effectively managed to cope with demand.
 9. Processes and procedures not clearly defined following relocation.
 10. Customer issues not quickly resolved / escalated.
 11. No set performance measures in place / performance levels not reported.
 12. Collusion between customers and Customer Service Advisers.
 13. Health and wellbeing of customers adversely affected if services are unavailable.
 14. Physical health and wellbeing of staff at new Pump Rooms reception.
- 3.3 A 'risk-based audit' approach has been adopted, whereby key risks have been identified during discussions between the Internal Auditor and key departmental staff. The Customer & Digital Services risk register and Significant Business risk register have also been reviewed.
- 3.4 These risks, if realised, would be detrimental with regards to meeting Priority 1 of the new Corporate Strategy, 'Warwick District 2030'. The objectives of the Change Management Programme are clearly set out in the case for change, and these have been incorporated into the Corporate Strategy. The Change Programme will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of how the Council delivers services to ensure it remains responsive and accessible to customer needs. The Change Management Programme will make it easier for customers to contact the Council and enable the CSC to help more customers at the first point of contact.

4 **Findings**

4.1 **Recommendations from Previous Reports**

- 4.1.1 There were no recommendations arising from the previous report.

4.2 Financial Risks

4.2.1 Potential Risk: Cost effectiveness of services cannot be demonstrated.

There has been no formal review conducted to explore the differences in cost between providing a centralised CSC and a 'distributed' model i.e. where individual teams across the Council handle their own calls. This is because there is very little by way of quantifiable evidence as to how much resource each service has dedicated to front facing customer interactions. Furthermore, not every team in the Council uses the call system software, so there is no way to monitor every customer query that the Council receives. There are also 120 generic email addresses on the WDC website that provide no meaningful insight into the work that these produce. The cost of centralising the CSC can, therefore, only be based on estimates as to how many customer queries the Council receives in total.

Currently, calls concerning WDC waste permits and waste collections are dealt with by Stratford-on-Avon District Council (SDC). There is a plan in place to bring these calls back in-house to WDC and there have been some discussions on the likely implications of this between the Head of Customer & Digital Services and the Neighbourhood Services Manager (NSM). SDC have provided the Head of Customer & Digital Services with a breakdown of waste call volumes, although data regarding the average call times was not obtained. Moreover, SDC did not separate the waste call performance figures into WDC-related queries and SDC-related queries, further complicating this issue.

By bringing waste calls back in-house, the extra call demand would justify the appointment of more Customer Service Advisers (CSA), or certainly justify bringing in a temporary resource to cope with the initial demand. The NSM has advised that by bringing the waste calls back in-house, savings would amount to approximately £100k, but this figure is based on no extra staff being required to cope with the demand.

In a CRM, a customer starts their journey by submitting the details of what they require through a structured mechanism, which is then recorded in a database. From there, workflows are triggered according to the service requested and the outcome is returned to the customer upon completion. A record of the interaction is stored within the CRM, which can be accessed should a problem require investigation. Interactions are visible to both staff and customers, from their own secure, online portal. Customers can use a variety of mechanisms to submit their information including online via the Council's website or app, and other 'offline' channels such as telephone or face-to-face.

It was reported to Cabinet in March 2024 that the anticipated costs of procuring a CRM would be £218,050 based on a four-year contract. These costs would include twenty licenses for the CSC, integration with e-Payments and various methods of testing. These licences will provide full access to the system and allow for the complete management of transactions. Procurement for the system was agreed on 28 June 2024. Year one costs specifically for the CRM will be approximately £71,500, which can be funded from the Customer and Digital Services Digital Seed Budget. This includes a contingency of approximately 10% of the year one budget.

An introduction of a CRM will make the CSC the first point of contact, allowing queries to be resolved in real-time. The CRM will also shine a light on how services operate and provide a truer picture of how customer queries are currently dealt with across the Council. There will be no need to replace back-office systems as these can be integrated into the new CRM. Contractors will also be able to use it as a workflow tool; contractors will be given a suitable level of access to allow them to view their work queues and any outstanding job requests.

The CRM system itself will not generate a financial saving as it is a new system that will incur new costs; however, it will directly facilitate increased efficiency of back-office systems. Additional savings will also be generated through posts no longer required or the replacement of obsolete software. After the integration of the waste calls, other services will likely be brought under a centralised call system, although certain teams may have sufficient capacity to justify maintaining their own customer administration teams e.g. Housing.

The full year CSC budget for 2024/25 is £652,000, £88,786 of which has already been spent. In comparison, there was an underspend of £114,338 during 2023/24, as the team struggled to fill its vacant posts.

The Benefits and Customer Services Manager (BCSM) meets with the Assistant Accountant quarterly to discuss the budget, and, upon discussion, it was confirmed that the budget includes all known costs to the service.

4.3 **Legal and Regulatory Risks**

4.3.1 **Potential Risk: Failure to comply with legislation and regulations surrounding customer service, e.g. GDPR / Consumer Rights Act 2015.**

The Customer Services Team Leader (CSTL) advised that the team follow the general corporate policies with regards to GDPR and Data Protection. Any guidelines related to necessary laws and regulations, or changes to legislation, are cascaded down to the team by the BCSM. The CSTL advised that data breaches have occurred where letters involving more than one benefit claimant have been sent in a single envelope; breaches of this nature are reported directly through the Intranet.

Recommendation – Staff should be reminded to thoroughly check all letters before these are folded and sent for posting.

The CSA training documents include how to report a data breach. All staff have recently undertaken training relating to the Memorandum of Understanding between WDC and the DWP; all other data protection training is completed through Meta. A Data Protection Group is due to be established by the Head of Governance, of which the BCSM will be a member.

Recommendation - Refresher Data Protection Training should be held on an annual basis.

4.3.2 **Potential Risk: Potential accessibility issues following relocation to the Pump Rooms.**

There are no issues with customer accessibility to the Pump Rooms, although the BCSM is in the process of installing a hearing loop. The location of the Pump Rooms is considered 'accessible' given that it is situated in the town centre which offers easy transport connections.

Auditor observation confirmed that the layout of the new CSC is accessible for both customers and staff; all facilities are located on the ground floor and there are no physical obstacles. There is, however, not much space for staff; there are four workstations in the CSC office. It was highlighted that previously, if all stations were in use, customers could often hear other CSAs on the phone; this issue has, however, been resolved.

Whilst the office is wheelchair accessible, the reception desk is partially blocked by a printer. The CSTL has requested that the printer be moved, and the dimensions of the desk measured, to ensure that it allows all staff to work from the reception desk; one CSA is a wheelchair user.

The Arts Manager is in the process of obtaining appropriate signage for the CSC, as currently there is just a pull-up banner in place with which to direct customers.

4.4 **Reputational Risks**

4.4.1 **Potential Risk: Services provided do not meet applicable standards and / or public expectations.**

Staff performance is fed back to individual CSAs during appraisals. If an issue is picked up that affects the whole team, this is fed back during team meetings. Training attendance sheets are maintained through I-Trent and on Meta compliance. The CSTL compiles call performance statistics in weekly, monthly, and quarterly reports. Call monitoring also takes place as and when the CSTL is free to do so, with the CSTL reviewing the calls and discussing these with the individual CSA if improvements are needed; all calls taken by CSAs are noted on CIVICA.

The CSTL maintains individual records of CSA statistics that include the number of calls an officer has taken during the week, as well as the amount of time an officer is ready to receive a call, and the percentage of calls that take longer than six minutes. This data also captures the percentage of calls an individual officer has taken, compared to the number of calls received by the entire team during that week.

A number of Benefits work items were identified through CIVICA. These were then examined by the auditor to check how CSAs had dealt with customer enquiries. In all ten cases, the actions taken by the CSAs were commensurate with the nature of the query and consistent with procedural documentation. In five of the ten cases, the advice given to the customer was recorded on the system, and was accurate, relevant, and consistent across the sample. In all ten

cases, the query and the actions taken were appropriately recorded on the diary notes.

A number of Council Tax work items were also examined. In all twenty cases, the actions taken by the CSAs were consistent with procedural documentation. In nine of the twenty cases, the advice given to the customer was recorded in the system. In nineteen of the twenty cases, both the query and the actions taken were appropriately recorded on the diary notes.

Advisory – Consideration should be given to reminding staff of the importance of adding diary notes to the system.

A number of Business Rates work items were also examined in the same manner. In all twenty cases, the actions taken by the CSAs were commensurate with the query and consistent with procedural documentation. In fifteen of the twenty cases, the advice given to the customer was recorded on the system and was consistent across the sample. There was one case where the advice given was not recorded, although a confirmation bill was later sent as requested by the customer. In eighteen of the twenty cases, the query and the actions taken, were appropriately recorded on the diary notes.

4.4.2 Potential Risk: Staff not provided with sufficient resources at new offices.

The Project Manager for the Office Relocation is due to compile a 'lessons learned' report following the move to the Pump Rooms, and as part of this, a customer survey will be devised and distributed in September 2024. It was noted as part of auditor observation that there are members of the public who still approach the CSC thinking that it is the exit to the Pump Rooms; this reinforces the aforementioned need for appropriate signage, which is being dealt with by the Arts Manager.

The Project Manager advised that customer feedback will be obtained on the new location and how the facilities are being used. This will include the number of people using the Pump Rooms versus the number of customers that visited Riverside House. The Head of Customer & Digital Services will then use these survey results as the basis for a report going to Overview and Scrutiny in October 2024. Lessons learned will help determine whether Customer Services will remain in the Pump Rooms or if they will leave the town centre and reintegrate with the back office during any future relocations.

The BCSM advised that the plans for the new offices were shared with the CSC staff for their comments, and both the BCSM and CSTL had input into the size of the pods. There was, however, a lack of 3D plans provided by the contractor; although requested, these were never provided. This made it very difficult for staff to visualise what the CSC would look like upon completion.

The CSTL advised that there have been some issues with resources. A specific photocopier needs to be sourced which can scan documents straight to CIVICA; this has to be compatible with CIVICA software. The photocopier currently located behind the reception desk is too large and prevents more than one CSA from using the space. As there is a contract in place with Ricoh UK Limited, it is

proving difficult to get this rectified; however, the team are sourcing alternative locations as to where the current photocopier can be placed. Although previously there was no privacy film on the CSC office door, the door has now been measured for a privacy screen, meaning that customers will no longer be able to see directly into the back office. The CSC staff are also waiting on contractors to amend the office door so that it opens automatically.

The CSC fire doors do not currently function, and a report has been passed to Pinner in order to get this rectified. There are also issues with some of the fire alarms which can be falsely triggered in periods of hot weather. This is a particular issue for wheelchair users; a point that has been raised with the Health & Safety Group by the BCSM.

There was, up until August, no heating or air conditioning in the reception offices; however, this has now been rectified. The CSTL advised that any issues with the facilities are directly sent to the Pump Rooms Building Surveyors.

Advisory – Consideration should be given to ensuring that any issues identified with the facilities are rectified as soon as practicable.

Recommendation – Guidance should be compiled outlining where and how CSC staff can report facility issues.

The team have also had some issues with recruitment and retention. The BCSM advised that they need to look to appoint another CSTL to manage the CSC when the current Team Leader is on leave.

4.4.3 **Potential Risk: Inaccurate, irrelevant, or inconsistent information / advice provided to customers.**

The CSC take calls for the Elections, Benefits, and Revenues teams as well as the general Council switchboard. The team also deal with face-to-face queries for the whole Council, whether this be through booked appointments or ad-hoc queries.

There are training documents in place and the CSTL is currently compiling Wiki 'how-to' pages as sources of instruction; the CSTL did advise that the team obtain most of their information from the WDC website. The CIVICA Open Vision manual also provides CSAs with step-by-step instructions on how to display customer records, display council tax accounts, request bills, and set special arrangements (SPARs).

The training manual includes procedural steps, relevant legislation and general documents covering a variety of topics such as council tax bills, tax exemptions, student accounts, insolvency, holiday lets, business rates relief, universal credit, benefits, and valuation tribunals.

The BCSM advised that there are currently two telephone systems in place to cater for the teams who have not yet been fully migrated over to MS Teams. The new telephony system uses Webex software and the BCSM is in the process of testing this. When testing the new system, there have been occasions where there has been no answer from certain teams. It was also found that telephone

numbers were in place which connected to officers who left the organisation some time ago. A similar incident also occurred where the Deputy Chief Executive was assigned a phone number for the anti-social behaviour complaint hotline. This reiterates the need to remove phone numbers from the public domain following the implementation of the CRM.

Currently, customers can either call the switchboard or directly call individual departments. This means that telephone messages are repeated to address the possibility that any of these lines could have been called - for example, calling the Benefits team through the switchboard will bring about the same message as calling the Benefits team directly. These are currently being shortened and will be recorded by one voice to ensure consistency.

Presently, the Council's online forms, telephones, social media, and face-to-face operations are all independent. This approach makes it virtually impossible for a customer to easily transition between one communication channel and another, as their information exists in isolation. It also creates significant limitations on the ability to provide customer updates, particularly if information is held in service specific software or mailboxes with restricted access.

As of April 2023, there were 132 email addresses published on the Council's website as a means for the public to contact WDC; the Council also currently has over 100 online forms. This is being addressed and the introduction of a CRM should reduce the number of direct numbers available to call.

Contact details are located on the website, on letters and through email signatures. The phone lines are available 8:45am-17:15 pm Monday to Thursday and 8.45am-16:45pm on Fridays. Emergency out of hours contacts are also advertised.

The new CSC has been advertised on the WDC website and customers have been informed that Riverside House is now permanently closed; map directions to the Pump Rooms have been included on the website. The new reception was also actively promoted through social media in order to make customers aware of the relocation. Customers have been told that the Council's administrative offices at Saltisford and the Town Hall are not open or accessible for public enquiries.

4.4.4 **Potential Risk: Staff not adequately trained / customer focused.**

The Council Tax team have shared useful information with the CSC, including the council tax accounts where probate has been granted. The CSC team also receive 'targeted' training when specific types of enquiries are expected (e.g. elections). The team will be trained on the new telephony service when the system is fully introduced. Training will be provided, and training notes prepared for each service taken on by the CSC moving forward; this is already in progress for the waste calls.

During introductory training, CSC staff can only take switchboard calls. Once suitably trained, the CSTL can then manually move officers onto the individual Council Tax and Benefits phone lines. New starters can listen into calls with more experienced CSAs, as the team have special headsets which allow them to

do this. Once a CSA feels confident to take their own calls, a more experienced CSA is on hand to listen. All staff are given the same initial training plan, but specific issues are discussed in individual appraisals. The CSTL controls which queue a CSA is given, based on their requisite skill level.

4.4.5 **Potential Risk: Resources not effectively managed to cope with demand.**

All CSC staff work the phone lines and the CSTL can reduce the lines in periods of low staffing.

The CSTL is concerned that with the waste calls being brought back in-house, this will increase the call load to 900 extra calls per month. The CSC currently take about 4,020 calls per month; an extra 900 represents an increase of approximately 23%. The CSC are also due to lose a member of staff in February 2025, due to the officer being on a two-year contract.

Whichever staff member is free in the Pump Rooms will be put on face-to-face duties. Whether staff can deal with walk-ins, fully depends on how busy the phone lines are. The CSTL advised that there have been times where the phone queues have been stacked back and customers waiting in reception have had to be advised to leave their telephone number for a CSA to call them back.

Advisory – Consideration should be given to appointing extra Customer Service Advisers to prepare for the increase in call demand and ensure that face-to-face customers are not neglected.

The CSC team are not always made aware of any planned changes to services, although the BCSM informally notifies the team of upcoming events such as the Elections. The CSTL advised that since the move to the Pump Rooms, communication from WDC to the CSC is somewhat lacking, and there is a general feeling that Council officers do not understand the role of the CSC.

Recommendation – Guidance needs to be distributed to WDC staff (e.g. through the Intranet) explaining the roles and responsibilities of the CSC following their move to the Pump Rooms.

The BCSM advised that she can generate reports detailing the number of telephone calls taken. The CSTL generates weekly and monthly call reports for the BCSM, and the Revenues and Recovery Manager is sent monthly call statistics; weekly call reports are distributed amongst the CSC team.

There are no expected levels of performance that state how many calls must be taken. The CSTL has an expectation that CSAs working from home will take more calls than those dealing with face-to-face queries in the Pump Rooms.

The second stage of the Change Management Programme will focus on customer service redesign, reviewing all customer related processes and procedures, and creating a new operating model for customer service delivery. The aim of introducing a CRM is to have a more holistic view of each customer and their service interactions, thus minimising the amount of customer data that is needed. The creation of a customer portal will enable the customer to see their history of interaction, launch new requests, submit information, and get updates

on requests in progress by single sign-on. Measuring the success of this will be based on the number of customers who rate WDC services as 'good' or 'very good' by 2026.

The CSTL advised that she and two CSAs have been involved in meetings regarding the new CRM. The CSC will also be heavily involved in testing the CRM before it is implemented; the CRM supplier, Jadu, are due to hold demos with the team. The Head of Customer & Digital Services advised that testing and training on the CRM system will take at least two months. As services are transitioned into the CRM, CSC staff will be fully trained and provided with the necessary resources to deal with as many types of enquiry as possible, at first point of contact. Unlike current operations, requests will only be escalated to back-office services if there is either a functional (e.g., waste collection vehicle needing to pick up a missed bin) or a hierarchical need (e.g., the need for a Planning Officer to provide expert advice). Where escalation is required, the CSC will endeavour to collect as much information as possible to facilitate the service delivery being carried out effectively.

Customers will receive updates to their queries from data either directly entered into the CRM by the CSC operative or back-office staff member, or from information entered into line-of-business applications, integrated within the CRM system; updates and information will not be re-keyed or duplicated manually.

4.4.6 **Potential Risk: Processes and procedures not clearly defined following relocation.**

The CSA job description clearly outlines that officers should ensure that where possible, customer enquiries, payments and complaints are resolved at the first point of contact for a wide range of Council services. The CSTL job description is currently being updated.

The CSTL has created a new fire procedure for the CSC. The team's responsibility is to evacuate the Customer Service area through the fire doors which lead to the outside of the Pump Rooms. One of the CSA's is a dedicated fire warden, but in their absence, the Art Gallery & Museum staff take the lead on this; fire alarms are tested every Monday.

All instructions to customers and addresses in the switchboard directory have been updated to reflect the move to the Town Hall and the Pump Rooms. Certain CSC documentation has been updated to reflect the move; however, there are several documents (approx. twenty five) that still refer to Riverside House in the CSC training manual. There are also documents that refer to officers who have either left the Council or are no longer in the positions described, such as the homeless drop-in instructions and the structure for landlord operations.

Recommendation - Any documents in the manual that refer to Riverside House should be updated.

Advisory – Consideration should be given to updating the training manual to reflect staff job titles.

There are no corporate customer service standards to which the team must adhere. The CSTL advised that since the relocation of the CSC to the Pump Rooms, processes and procedures need to be streamlined. As a result of this, the CSTL is in the process of compiling a procedure manual which will form part of the CRM. The Head of Customer & Digital Services advised that there is no set Council standard as to what 'good' customer service looks like. Discussions are being held which advocate following the Customer Service Excellence (CSE) Standard. Originally issued by the Cabinet Office, this contains twenty items of criteria including 'understanding the customer', 'meeting customer demand', and 'consistent performance'. As part of the introduction of the CRM, customer service standards will be formally implemented.

4.4.7 **Potential Risk: Customer issues not quickly resolved / escalated.**

If possible, queries can be dealt with by the CSC at first point of contact. The CSTL advised that there is still a 'Contact Us' email inbox linked to the CSC, although this is not actively advertised as it is no longer needed. If any emails come into this inbox, they are usually forwarded on directly to the relevant department.

Advisory – Consideration should be given to closing the 'Contact Us' email inbox.

The CSTL advised that most CSAs are able to deal with queries themselves before they have to be escalated up the organisation. The team maintain a list of switchboard numbers, including staff extensions and external contact numbers. CSAs can also use the staff directory on the Intranet to find officer details. The new telephone system is due to go live on 21 August 2024; this contains a staff directory to enable the transfer of calls.

Generic department numbers should be used as much as possible; it is the policy at WDC that if a person is unable to answer the call themselves, they should make alternative arrangements for their calls to be answered or at least transferred to voicemail. There are five options on the switchboard number to direct calls automatically including Housing, Revenues & Benefits, Contract Services, Development Services, and other enquiries.

Although there is no reference to customers in the Emergency Management Plan (last updated in January 2023), the most recent Business Continuity Plan (BCP) includes customer services and the management of customer expectations during incidents. There may be circumstances where the Council is required to ensure that customers and members of the public are kept informed of Council progress following business interruption. The BCP, therefore, includes a guide to assist the Council in disseminating key information to customers and members of the public e.g. alternative premises where assistance can be sought or where payments can be made.

The public communication strategy flowchart addresses questions such as 'what does the public need to know', 'how will this information be disseminated', 'can individual services provide communication with the public', and 'is there a continuous flow of regularly updated information'. As the frontline service is

discretionary, the recovery priority is three to seven days. The BCP has been updated to reflect the move to the Pump Rooms for CSC staff.

There is a CSC-specific BCP that sets out the actions to be taken in the event that there is an issue with the telephone system; however, this has not been updated since 2022. This includes the guidelines for adding urgent messages to the phone lines. If any situation arose forcing the face-to-face service to close, all staff are expected to take telephone calls to deal with the likely increase in demand. The Emergencies and Resilience Lead Officer has advised that this BCP is due to be moved onto a new template in order to reflect the changes in service area.

There are no set scripts or call responses that CSAs use. CSAs work with customers to find the best solution and aim to converse rather than provide stock answers. Auditor observation confirmed that this was the case both during phone calls and over the reception desk. There is a training document in place containing generic greeting messages.

Advisory – Once the CSC has been fully migrated over to MS Teams, consideration should be given to updating the switchboard training documents where reference is made to Cisco Jabber.

The CSC do not transfer calls to external agencies; switchboard training, therefore, includes a list of contact details for the District and Borough Councils that surround WDC. During induction, officers are trained on the required behavioural expectations, such as how to demonstrate empathy or work with vulnerable customers. CSAs have a large degree of autonomy when dealing with customer enquiries, but particularly in-depth queries are sent through to the back office.

The CSC use the WDC corporate complaint procedure. Upon receipt of a complaint, if the relevant service cannot resolve the issue, this will proceed to Stage 1 - initial investigation. At Stage 2, the complaint can be considered by the Policy, Performance and Complaints Manager. If a customer complains about a member of the CSC, this is dealt with by the CSTL, whereas any service complaints are sent to the individual department in question. Emails of complaint regarding the CSC are shared with the BCSM.

CSAs include follow-up appointments on their calendars where a customer is expecting a callback. CSAs also deal with safeguarding referrals providing that the customer has given their permission.

A list of switchboard master messages has been compiled which covers emergency and out of hours calls, as well as when queues are busy or reduced due to staff training; this procedure will change when the new system is introduced, and emergency messages will be updated accordingly. With a CRM in place, the CSC could easily update a customer on the progress of their request. The system would query any back-office application autonomously, and the CSA would simply have to repeat the information to the customer. The customer can also do this for themselves on the Council's website.

There are no maximum wait times or hold times to which the CSC must adhere. CSC staff operate all work queues once trained and so calls are picked up by the next available officer. Benefits receive the lowest volume of calls; it is only at year-end when Benefits calls increase, although even this has reduced in volume.

Staff are required to make notes regarding the customer enquiry which is classed as working time. This means that calls can take anywhere between two and twenty minutes, hence there being no set call time in which queries must be resolved or answered. Call statistics include the shortest and longest wait times for individual CSAs.

The CSTL generates quarterly reports which examine the number of calls presented, average queue times, maximum queue times, the number of calls handled, the average speed of answer, the average handle time, maximum handle time, and the number of calls abandoned. Daily call reports list the number of calls handled versus the number of calls presented. The CSTL has also compiled a spreadsheet that details both the weekly and monthly statistics for each service e.g. Council Tax, Benefits, Switchboard. These compare the figures from the previous year against the current year.

A number of calls were selected from the CSA weekly reports. These were then examined by the auditor to explore the longest and shortest call times. The sample focused on the week commencing 3 June 2024. On average, the shortest call handling time was forty seconds and the longest call lasted for nineteen minutes. A test was also conducted from these call logs to determine if the CSC had been sufficiently manned. It was found across the sample that on each day the switchboard was sufficiently staffed to cover opening times, although this did not take into account peak and off-peak times. Based on the number of calls taken throughout April and May 2024, on average, the CSC take 832 calls per week. Across the year, a total of 40,696 calls were handled and a total of 5,429 calls were abandoned. This reiterates a need for more staff, especially with the forthcoming waste calls and during busy periods e.g. when summons are distributed.

4.4.8 **Potential Risk: No set performance measures in place / performance levels not reported.**

The previous target for the number of Revenues and Benefits calls handled was 2,500 although there has not been any performance information published since June 2022 when 3,152 calls were taken. The 2023/24 service area plan (SAP) included KPIs such as the number of Revenues/Benefits calls handled, and the number of calls abandoned after ten minutes; however, the interim KPI spreadsheet uploaded to the Business Intelligence Portal did not include any performance figures against these 'targets.'

Recommendation – The KPI relating to the number of Benefits and Revenues calls taken, needs to be updated to reflect that the CSC also handle Elections and Switchboard calls.

Call statistics are supposed to be reported to the Head of Customer & Digital Services. Although previously this did not regularly occur, this has been taking

place whilst the team have been transitioning to a new call management system; the same resources that provide the call statistics reports were deployed in this transition.

Recommendation – Call statistic reports should be sent onto the Head of Customer & Digital Services, as appropriate.

The team do not directly ask for customer feedback or send out user satisfaction surveys, but they do receive complimentary feedback from customers either through emails or over the phone. Call data is used to improve performance; if any specific feedback is given to the CSTL, she will discuss this with the relevant CSA. There is also a CSC MS Teams chat in place where queries can be discussed if they are particularly challenging.

4.5 Fraud Risks

4.5.1 Potential Risk: Collusion between customers and Customer Service Advisers.

CSAs have access to CIVICA, Active H, WebReg, and CISCO. For Benefits and Revenues, if staff live in the District, they are required to declare their address and are subsequently locked out of any modules or work items relating to that address. This is the same procedure if staff declare that they are the landlord of any properties in the District. All CSC staff are subject to DBS checks and must request access to CIVICA through the forms located on the Intranet; staff must adhere to the confidentiality agreement contained within these forms. Staff must also have obtained a DBS check before being given access to the Benefits module.

There are no conflict of interest forms which must be signed; however, if staff have a personal connection to a customer, the query is passed over to another member of the team. The names of CSC staff were cross referenced against CIVICA and Active H by the auditor to check that officers had not accessed their own accounts. It was found in all eleven cases, that the CSA identified had not handled any queries on their account.

Recommendation – All Council departments should ensure that all staff are subject to thorough verification checks before being given access to a specific system.

The employee code of conduct highlights that employees must not use their working relationships or take advantage of their status as a Council employee to advance their interests or views as a resident of the District. Although employees should declare if they are a member of the Resident's Association, there is nothing specific in the Code of Conduct which says employees must declare that they live in the district.

Staff have received corporate fraud training, although one member of staff is still waiting to receive this. The CSTL advised that staff are directed to the Intranet should they wish to read any of the Council policies.

CSAs have view-only access to Active H meaning that they cannot deal with tenant rent accounts or create diary notes. On CIVICA, CSAs can set instalments, SPARs, and diary notes as well as print and post bills. They do not, however, have access to HomeChoice; instead HomeChoice applications have to be scanned in and sent to the Housing Allocations team.

4.6 **Health and Safety Risks**

4.6.1 **Potential Risk: Health and wellbeing of customers adversely affected if services are unavailable.**

There are two members of staff who work full-time from home; not all staff have the necessary RSA tokens to work from home. There are seven members of staff who work full time from the Pump Rooms.

If homeless citizens come into the reception, the CSC do not have the jurisdiction to deal with their query. Whilst most homeless citizens are happy to wait for a call or MS Teams call (in a pod) with the relevant Housing Officer at a later time or date, there have been occasions where this has not been the case; this poses potential harm to members of the CSC if citizens demand to speak to a Housing Officer. The CSC were promised by the Housing team before the move, that an officer would be available to deal with these scenarios, or at least be available to take calls from homeless citizens at an agreed time.

Advisory – Consideration should be given to reminding Housing staff of their duties to communicate with the CSC and ensure that they are available to help.

The main reception desk is manned at all times during opening hours; this does, however, mean that lunch breaks between staff have to be switched to ensure fairness and sufficient coverage of the reception desk. There are two private pods also located in reception. CSAs do not sit with customers when they are in MS Teams meetings with members of staff. The equipment put into the pods was made as secure as possible and the potential risk for equipment to become damaged or stolen was accepted. The devices installed have been locked down so that customers are unable to access anything on the Council's network; these devices can only be used for MS Teams calls. Due to limited space, staff can work in the pods with their laptops to take telephone calls and staff have been provided with lockable pedestals in which to store their laptops. If staff are away from the pod for any length of time, they have been made aware that laptops must be removed.

4.6.2 **Potential Risk: Physical health and wellbeing of staff at new Pump Rooms reception.**

There is no CCTV located in the new reception although panic alarms were installed in June-2024 both behind the reception desk and in the pods. The BCSM advised that the team have a security guard in place, but this is not a permanent arrangement as there have been issues with Procurement. In terms of the physical environment, CSC staff have a radio which can be used to contact the Community Wardens if a situation arose where back-up was required.

Advisory – Consideration should be given to funding an extra Community Warden, who could be permanently stationed around the Pump Rooms.

There are two fire exits located in the reception, one of which can be used by staff working in the back part of the office. Staff are required to sign in when working at the Pump Rooms.

A risk assessment has not been conducted since the move to the new reception. The Casual Health and Safety and Premises Manager has made a start on this, but this had not been completed at the time of the audit.

Recommendation – A fully comprehensive risk assessment of the Pump Rooms reception should be completed as a matter of urgency.

If customers are abusive, it is up to the CSA as to whether they are prepared to continue with a call. The BCSM is looking to hold conflict management training in person for the CSC and a supplier has been sourced for this. This will have to be held over two sessions, as not all CSAs can be taken off the phone lines at the same time.

5 **Summary and Conclusions**

- 5.1 Section 3.2 sets out the risks that were reviewed as part of this audit. The review highlighted weaknesses against the following risks:
- Risk 2 – Failure to comply with legislation and regulations surrounding customer service, e.g., GDPR / Consumer Rights Act 2015.
 - Risk 5 – Staff not provided with sufficient resources at new offices.
 - Risk 8 - Resources not effectively managed to cope with demand.
 - Risk 9 – Processes and procedures not clearly defined following relocation.
 - Risk 11 - No set performance measures in place / performance levels not reported.
 - Risk 12 - Collusion between customers and Customer Service Advisers.
 - Risk 14 – Physical health and wellbeing of staff at new Pump Rooms reception.
- 5.2 Further 'issues' were also identified where advisory notes have been reported. In these instances, no formal recommendations are thought to be warranted as there are no significant risks attached to the actions not being taken.
- 5.3 In overall terms, we can give a MODERATE degree of assurance that the systems and controls in place in respect of Customer Access Facilities are appropriate and are working effectively to help mitigate and control the identified risks.
- 5.4 The assurance bands are shown below (overleaf):

Level of Assurance	Definition
Substantial	There is a sound system of control in place and compliance with the key controls.
Moderate	Whilst the system of control is broadly satisfactory, some controls are weak or non-existent and there is non-compliance with several controls.
Limited	The system of control is generally weak and there is non-compliance with controls that do exist.

6 **Management Action**

- 6.1 The recommendations arising above are reproduced in the attached Action Plan (Appendix A) for management.
- 6.2 The advisory comments above are reproduced in the attached Action Plan (Appendix B) for management consideration.

Ian Davy
Audit and Risk Manager

Action Plan

Internal Audit of Customer Access Facilities – September 2024

Report Ref.	Risk Area	Recommendation	Rating*	Responsible Officer(s)	Management Response	Target Date
4.3.1 (a)	Legal & Regulatory Risk: Failure to comply with legislation and regulations surrounding customer service, e.g., GDPR / Consumer Rights Act 2015.	Staff should be reminded to thoroughly check all letters before these are folded and sent for posting.	Medium	Customer Services Team Leader	Staff will be reminded of the importance of checking documents prior to posting, in order to comply with the relevant Data Protection regulations. The introduction of Hybrid Mail should negate the need for hand-printed mail.	31 August 2024
4.3.1 (b)	Legal & Regulatory Risk: Failure to comply with legislation and regulations surrounding customer service, e.g., GDPR / Consumer Rights Act 2015.	Refresher Data Protection Training should be held on an annual basis.	Low	Head of Customer & Digital Services	A cyber-security training plan has recently been developed which includes the requirement for all staff to undertake regular data protection refresher training within the next 12 months.	Completed.
4.4.2	Reputational Risk: Staff not provided with sufficient resources at new offices.	Guidance should be compiled outlining where and how CSC staff can report facility issues.	Low	Benefits & Customer Services Manager	We will determine the mechanism through which the CSC can report issues with the building and provide feedback to the CSTL.	31 August 2024
4.4.5	Reputational Risk: Resources not effectively managed to cope with demand.	Guidance needs to be distributed to WDC staff (e.g. through the Intranet) explaining the roles and responsibilities of the CSC following their move to the Pump Rooms.	Low	Benefits & Customer Services Manager	Agreed to compile document and get this distributed.	30 September 2024

Report Ref.	Risk Area	Recommendation	Rating*	Responsible Officer(s)	Management Response	Target Date
4.4.6	Reputational Risk: Processes and procedures not clearly defined following relocation.	Any documents in the manual that refer to Riverside House should be updated. The waste and recycling procedure will also need updating to reflect the calls being brought back into WDC.	Low	Customer Services Team Leader	This will be an ongoing project taking place as and when procedure notes are transferred to the wiki 'how-to' guides.	January 2025
4.4.8 (a)	Reputational Risk: No set performance measures in place / performance levels not reported.	The KPI relating to the number of Benefits and Revenues calls taken, needs to be updated to reflect that the CSC also handle Elections and Switchboard calls.	Medium	Head of Customer & Digital Services	This will be actioned as soon as the replacement Contact Centre Telephony Management system is in place (August 2024) for inclusion within SAP performance reporting requirements. Because of how the previous (outgoing) system was setup, differentiation between call types was problematic.	31 October 2024
4.4.8 (b)	Reputational Risk: No set performance measures in place / performance levels not reported.	Call statistic reports should be sent onto the Head of Customer & Digital Services, as appropriate.	Medium	Benefits & Customer Services Manager	This will be done on a monthly basis.	30 September 2024

Report Ref.	Risk Area	Recommendation	Rating*	Responsible Officer(s)	Management Response	Target Date
4.5.1	Fraud Risk: Collusion between customers and Customer Service Advisers.	All Council departments should ensure that all staff are subject to thorough verification checks before being given access to a specific system.	Medium	Head of Customer & Digital Services	Completing baseline security checks is a requirement of our Memorandum of Understanding with the DWP regarding access to their data. All current staff recruitment exercises include this requirement. Work will be undertaken with HR to ensure that all current employees have undertaken appropriate checks.	30 December 2024
4.6.2	Health & Safety Risk: Physical health and wellbeing of staff at new Pump Rooms reception.	A fully comprehensive risk assessment of the Pump Rooms reception should be completed as a matter of urgency.	High	Benefits & Customer Services Manager; Casual Health and Safety & Premises Manager.	This will be completed as a matter of urgency.	End of August 2024.

* The ratings refer to how the recommendation affects the overall risk and are defined as follows:

- High: Issue of significant importance requiring urgent attention.
- Medium: Issue of moderate importance requiring prompt attention.
- Low: Issue of minor importance requiring attention.

Action Plan

Internal Audit of Customer Access Facilities – September 2024

Report Ref.	Risk Area	Advisory Comment
4.4.1	Reputational Risk: Services provided do not meet applicable standards and / or public expectations.	Consideration should be given to reminding staff of the importance of adding diary notes to the system.
4.4.2	Reputational Risk: Staff not provided with sufficient resources at new offices.	Consideration should be given to ensuring that any issues identified with the facilities are rectified as soon as practicable.
4.4.5	Reputational Risk: Resources not effectively managed to cope with demand.	Consideration should be given to appointing extra Customer Service Advisers to prepare for the increase in call demand and ensure that face-to-face customers are not neglected.
4.4.6	Reputational Risk: Processes and procedures not clearly defined following relocation.	Consideration should be given to updating the training manual to reflect staff job titles.
4.4.7 (a)	Reputational Risk: Customer issues not quickly resolved / escalated.	Consideration should be given to closing the 'Contact Us' email inbox.
4.4.7 (b)	Reputational Risk: Customer issues not quickly resolved / escalated.	Once the CSC has been fully migrated over to MS Teams, consideration should be given to updating the switchboard training documents where reference is made to Cisco Jabber.
4.6.1	Health & Safety Risk: Health and wellbeing of customers adversely affected if services are unavailable.	Consideration should be given to reminding Housing staff of their duties to communicate with the CSC and ensure that they are available to help.
4.6.2	Health & Safety Risk: Physical health and wellbeing of staff at new Pump Rooms reception.	Consideration should be given to funding an extra Community Warden, who could be permanently stationed around the Pump Rooms.