

**LETTER FROM IMPROVEMENT SCRUTINY TO EXECUTIVE
IN RESPECT OF CONTACT CENTRE CONCERNS**

On behalf of Improvement Scrutiny Committee

The committee supports concerns raised in the report provided by the portfolio holder for customer services.

The Improvement Scrutiny committee requests the executive give serious consideration for protecting this front line service.

Chair Cllr H Gilmour



Vice Chair Cllr R Bowler



**IMPROVEMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
28TH AUGUST 2010**

**272. UPDATE ON TELEPHONE ABANDONMENT RATES FROM
COUNCILLOR D. MCGREGOR, PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR
CUSTOMER SERVICES**

The Portfolio Holder for Customer Services provided Members with a verbal update on the telephone abandonment rates at the Contact Centres.

Members were advised that a meeting had taken place between the Head of Customer Service and Performance and the Portfolio Holder for Customer Services (Councillor D. McGregor) in respect of concerns over telephone abandonment rates. These had been 14% in June 2010 and 13% in July compared to 9% in 2009. Members were advised that the increase in abandonment rates was largely due to reduced staffing levels in Contact Centres and it had been concluded that improvements were unlikely to occur until the issue of resources was fully addressed.

The Portfolio Holder for Customer Services asked Members to note a number of issues which had significantly contributed to the increase in telephone call abandonment rates:

- A vacant 18½ hour Customer Advisor's post had recently been filled and had an anticipated early September start date. However a training period of approximately two months would need to be undertaken following appointment which would impact on resources.
- A Contact Centre Manager's post was currently vacant due to maternity leave. The service would operate with only 3 Managers to cover the 4 Contact Centres until a temporary appointment could commence in mid September. This would result in a further part time Customer Advisor vacancy which would be covered by existing staff working additional hours. This would in turn increase the overtime budget and reduce the flexibility of the service to cover annual leave, sickness and lunch breaks. Attempts had been made to recruit temporary part time staff but this proved unsuccessful.
- The Meet and Greet position was currently vacant and being covered as far as possible by Customer Advisors. Consideration was being given to recruiting an apprentice to this post, no one would be in post until September 2010 and then several weeks of training would be required.
- A total of 620 hours overtime had been paid out of the 2010/2011 budget to cover vacancies, holidays and sickness. This was compared to 201

hours for the equivalent period last year. A further 230 hours would be submitted for July and 160 hours had already been scheduled for August.

- Most Customer Services Advisors had worked considerable additional hours which would need to be taken as Time Off in Lieu (TOIL). This would cause significant problems in respect of provision of service.
- 100 weeks of outstanding annual leave entitlement was still to be taken by Customer Advisors, again presenting difficulties with service cover.
- The service was expected to be within budget for the current year, taking into account amounts brought forward and transferred from unfilled vacancies.
- By September 2010 the service would be 7 staff down compared to the same period last year.

The Portfolio Holder for Customer Services confirmed that these issues would be raised at Cabinet and Senior Management Team. It was added that Contact Centre staff deserved high praise and had been extremely supportive, regularly swapping shifts and being as flexible as possible to ensure the service was covered.

Members were reminded that on two previous occasions, the Head of Customer Service and Performance had put forward suggestions for new ways of working. These had included a review of the payment strategy and a reduction in opening hours in order to relieve the strain on the service without requiring additional resources. These suggestions were not accepted by Members on either occasion.

The Portfolio Holder for Customer Services continued that Members' concerns in respect of abandonment rates were valid but if significant improvements were to be achieved, resources would need to be considered.

The Head of Housing joined the meeting at this point.

Members were reminded that the Contact Centres had achieved a Customer Excellence Award this year and had been awarded the Charter Mark for the next three years.

Concerns were expressed in respect of allowing this frontline service to decline and it was considered that the Council should do what it could to protect it.

Further concerns were added regarding overtime and TOIL, in particular that staff would be too busy to take the time back that was owed to them. It was added that a proper overtime budget needed to be set up to deal with major staffing

issues when they occurred. The Director of Neighbourhoods confirmed that if staff were owed TOIL then it should normally be taken within three months.

Members commented that the team do an excellent job and this was proven with the Customer Excellence Award.

It was further suggested that the budgets for the service be reviewed following the Spending Review later in the year.

Thanks were extended to Councillor McGregor for highlighting the problems and Members acknowledged the issues raised. Members added that they were unaware of the severity of the strain on staffing and resources at Contact Centres and shared the Portfolio Holder's concerns. It was agreed that these concerns should be conveyed to the Executive.

Moved by Councillor J.E. Smith, seconded by Councillor R. Turner
RESOLVED that the Improvement Scrutiny Committee write to the Executive highlighting the concerns raised in the report provided by the Portfolio Holder for Customer Services, requesting that the Executive gives serious consideration to protecting this front line service.

(Chair of Improvement Scrutiny)