

# Scrutiny Committee Report



Listening Learning Leading

Report of Head of Corporate Strategy

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To: Scrutiny Committee

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## AGENDA ITEM 7

## Customer service performance – 2010

### Recommendation(s)

Scrutiny Committee is invited to note current performance on customer service, including performance against corporate service standards; and areas for improvement identified for further work.

### Purpose of Report

1. This report shows performance for 2010 on customer service, including performance against our corporate service standards.

### Strategic Objectives

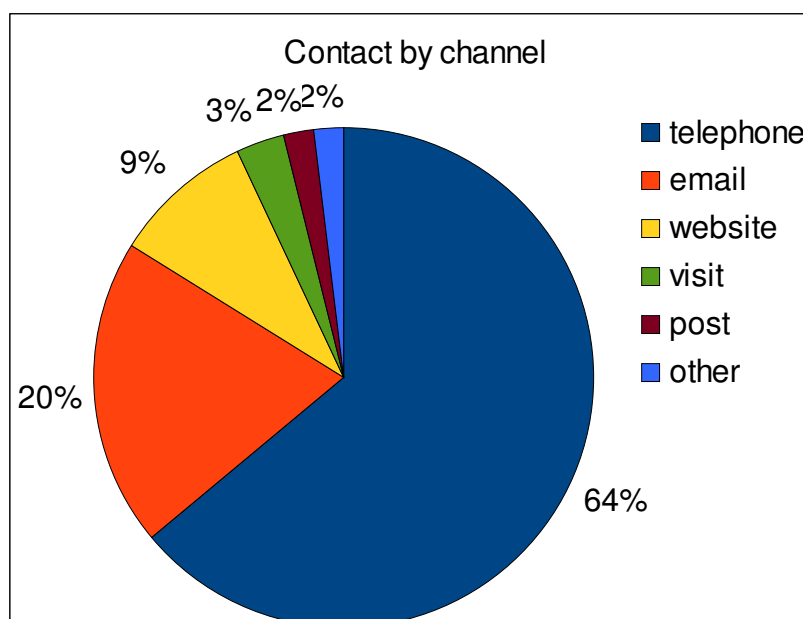
2. Improved customer service is fundamental to improving access to services and customer satisfaction, and therefore underpins all of our strategic objectives. It makes a specific contribution to our corporate priorities 'to improve equality of access to our services' and 'provide value for money services that meet the needs of our residents and service users'. The service standards are aimed at achieving an improvement in customer service across the council.

### Background

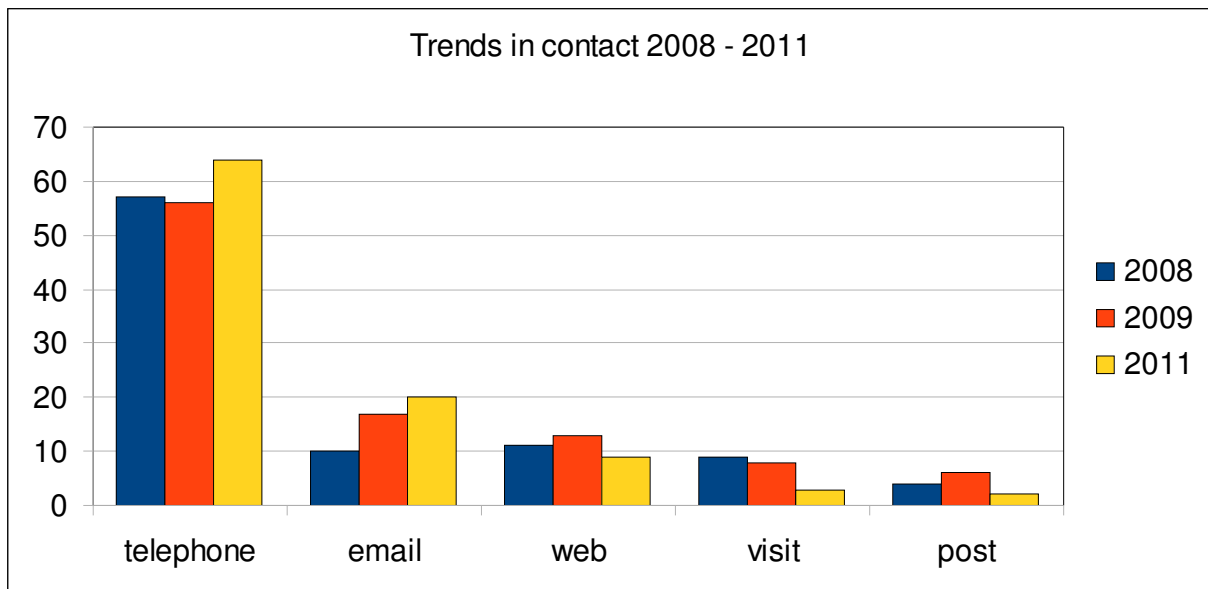
3. We developed our customer service standards in the context of customer feedback. The standards apply to our contact with external customers, whatever contact channel is used, i.e. telephone, email, letter or face to face. They do not apply to internal communications. A copy of the standards is attached at **appendix one** to this report.

## Preferred methods of contacting the council

- 45 per cent of those who took part in the survey have contacted the council in the past year or so, 55 per cent have not. The percentage of residents contacting the council has dropped by 14 per cent since the last time we carried out this survey; however the number of contacts was particularly high last time due to the roll out of the new household waste collection service. We would expect contact to have reduced from this 2009 peak. Groups most likely to contact the council are the 25-34 age group and those with families, people with a disability and those from urban areas.
- Most people have contacted us in relation to waste and recycling (41 per cent of contacts), followed by planning with 18 per cent, this is consistent with previous results. These are followed by environmental health (11 percent) and council tax (nine per cent). Contact with all other services remains comparatively low.
- The table below shows that contacting the council by telephone is the preferred method, telephone contact is up from 55 per cent last time we surveyed to 64 per cent; email has also increased from 17 to 20 per cent and remains the second most popular channel. Contact via the website and by visiting the council offices has decreased. The greater accessibility of telephone contact due to increased use of mobile phones may well be a contributing factor in this rise in telephone contacts.

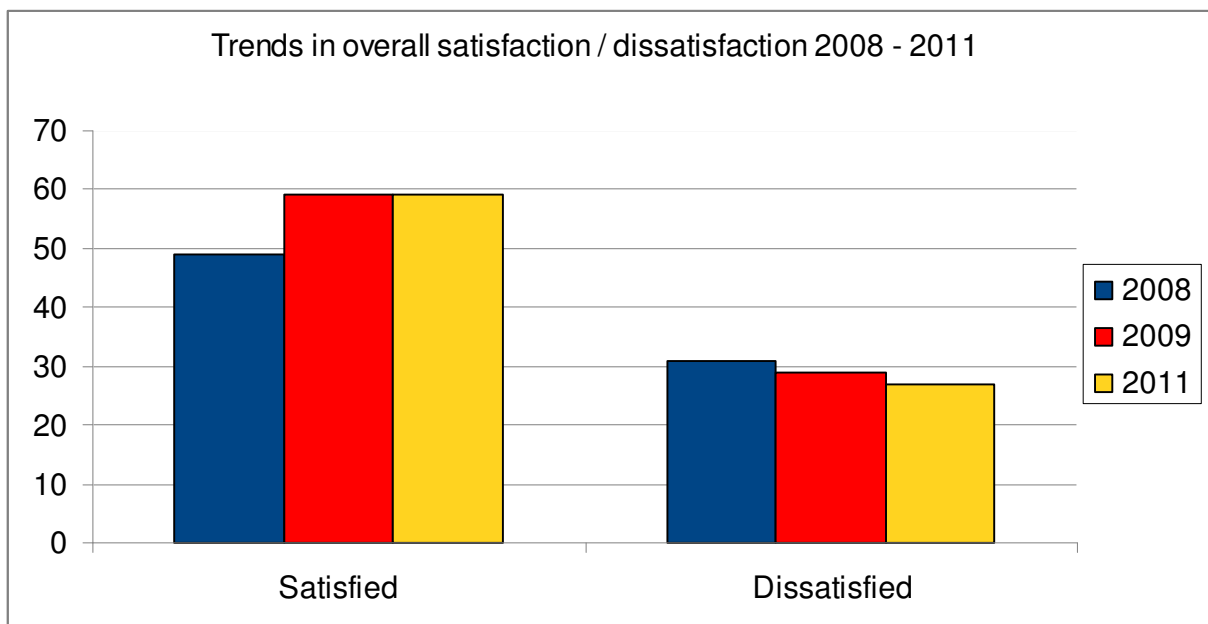


- Those most likely to contact us by telephone were the 25-34 age group and those customers who were unemployed.
- The chart below shows trends in the ways people contact us since our first survey in 2008.



## Overall satisfaction

9. There are similar levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with contact overall as last time we surveyed, with 59 per cent satisfied and 27 per cent dissatisfied. The graph below shows the trend over time, which is positive.



## Telephone

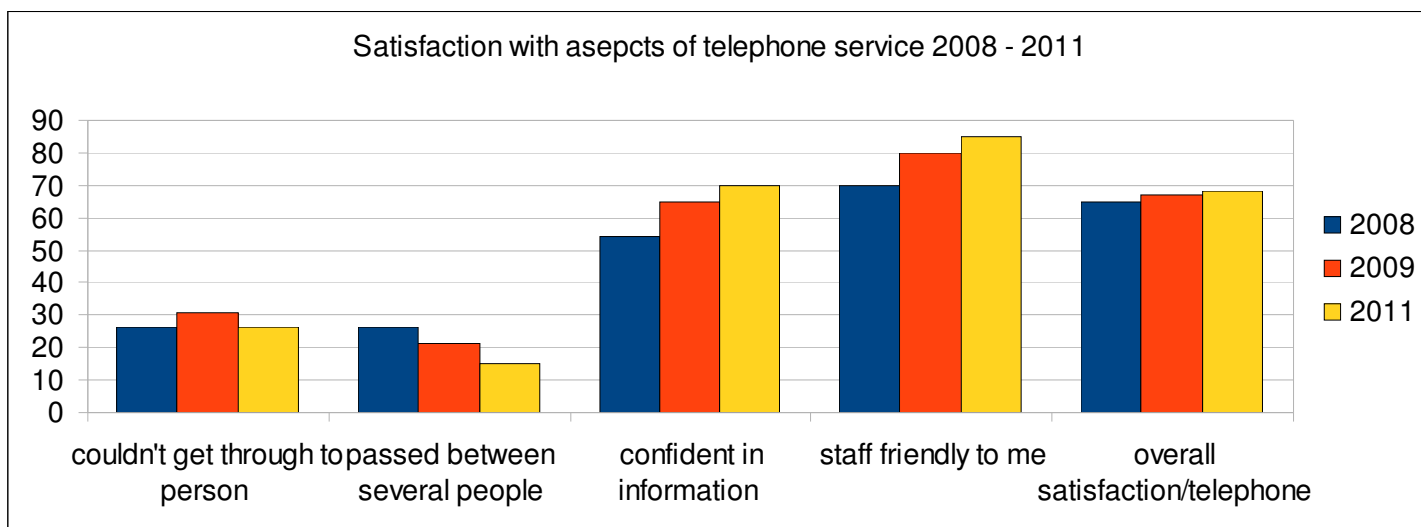
10. 71 per cent of the respondents who had contacted the council did so by telephone. 30 per cent have made contact by telephone just once, 16 per cent twice, seven per cent three times, and 18 per cent four or more times.
11. Our service standards relate to time taken to answer calls and time taken to respond to messages. In addition they make a commitment that telephones will be answered by a person rather than voicemail wherever possible.

12. We retrieve monitoring information from our telephone system each quarter. This allows us to measure time taken to answer calls and abandoned call rates. Reports for 2010 show that we received 217,836 calls in the year, 32,800 calls were abandoned by the caller (some of these may be because they were made outside of office hours). 98 per cent of those answered were answered within six rings.

13. 31 per cent of those surveyed said they contacted the council's general switchboard number, 46 per cent called a number for a specific team or person. 16 per cent called the switchboard and were then transferred. Two per cent called the Housing Benefit / Council Tax Benefit enquiry line. This is a very similar picture to the last time we surveyed.

14. Of those making calls to the switchboard 71 per cent were satisfied with the service they received, down by 17 per cent since the last survey. This is a significant downward trend; however satisfaction remains relatively high. 23 per cent said they were dissatisfied (up from five per cent last time). Overall (switchboard and direct dial) 68 per cent were satisfied with the telephone service they received from the council – similar to when last surveyed. This suggests that back office telephone service is less good than that experienced when contacting the switchboard but that the overall trend shows a slight improvement.

15. The graph below shows satisfaction with specific aspects of our telephone service and trends over the past three years.



16. For most aspects of customer service the customer experience has improved since the last time we surveyed; and has been on an upward trend since we first surveyed in 2008. However, the numbers of people saying that they couldn't get through to the person they wanted and that they were passed between several people before they got an answer has increased. It is possible that joint working and the number of staff working across both sites is a contributing factor here.

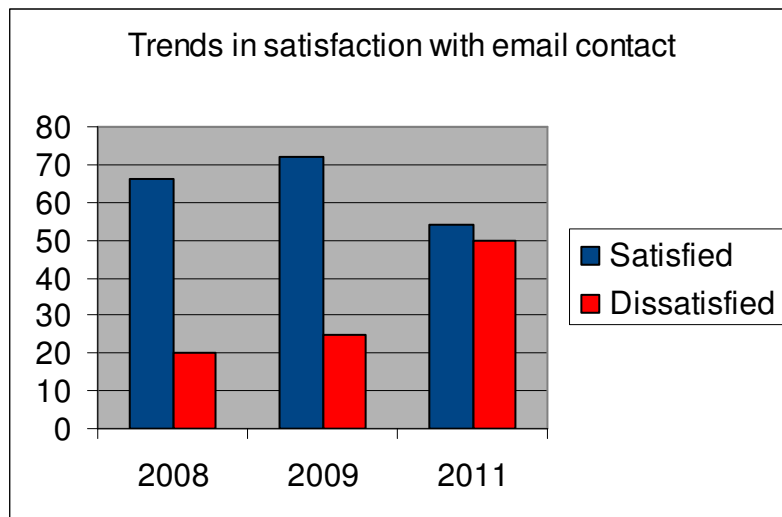
17. 28 per cent of those who could get through to the person they wanted to left a message, 48 per cent didn't – the number of people leaving a message has decreased significantly from 80 per cent in the last survey. 59 per cent of those

left a message on an answer phone and 34 per cent with another member of staff. This is slightly disappointing given that the presumption in our service standards is towards telephones being answered by staff and against use of voicemail. This may well be a natural consequence of increased shared working as a number of efficiencies have been achieved through reduction in staffing and increased numbers of staff working across both sites. However, we need to ensure so far as is possible that teams have the correct processes in place to ensure that telephones are answered, including staff covering colleagues telephones where they are unavailable. Also that staff have sufficient information available to them to know where to pass calls to.

18. Of those customers who left a message, 21 per cent said that no one called them back and 41 per cent said that a call back took more than one working day (the service standard promise). Whilst this is disappointing, the significantly reduced numbers of people leaving a message at all means that this is unlikely to be having a significantly detrimental impact on our overall customer service.
19. The planning service have trialled a message recording system which allows staff to track the number of messages taken and how quickly they are dealt with. These show that 76 per cent of telephone messages were responded to in 24 hours or less. This system is now available to all teams and they should be encouraged to use it as a tool to improve message response times.

## Email

20. The service standards relate to time taken to acknowledge, and for a full response to emails (1 day and 10 working days respectively).
21. It is relatively easy to monitor general team email boxes, because we can be fairly confident that admin staff check them on a regular basis. However, it is not possible to monitor personal email boxes because we would be dependent on individuals having monitoring systems in place, which is impractical given the number of emails some teams receive. Our only source of monitoring information therefore is customer survey feedback.
22. 47 per cent of those surveyed had contacted the council at least once in the past year by email; 51 per cent had not. There was an increase of eight per cent in those who had contacted us between one and five times by email. Whilst telephone is still the most likely way for people to contact us, this does show an increasing trend towards email contact, and this is an area where we have not performed so well in past surveys. Poor performance on email customer service could therefore have an increasingly significant impact on levels of overall customer satisfaction.
23. Unfortunately our most recent results show that satisfaction with email contact is still on a downward trend, with 54 per cent satisfied – an 18 per cent drop on last time; and those who are actively dissatisfied increasing from 25 to 30 per cent, as shown in the graph below.



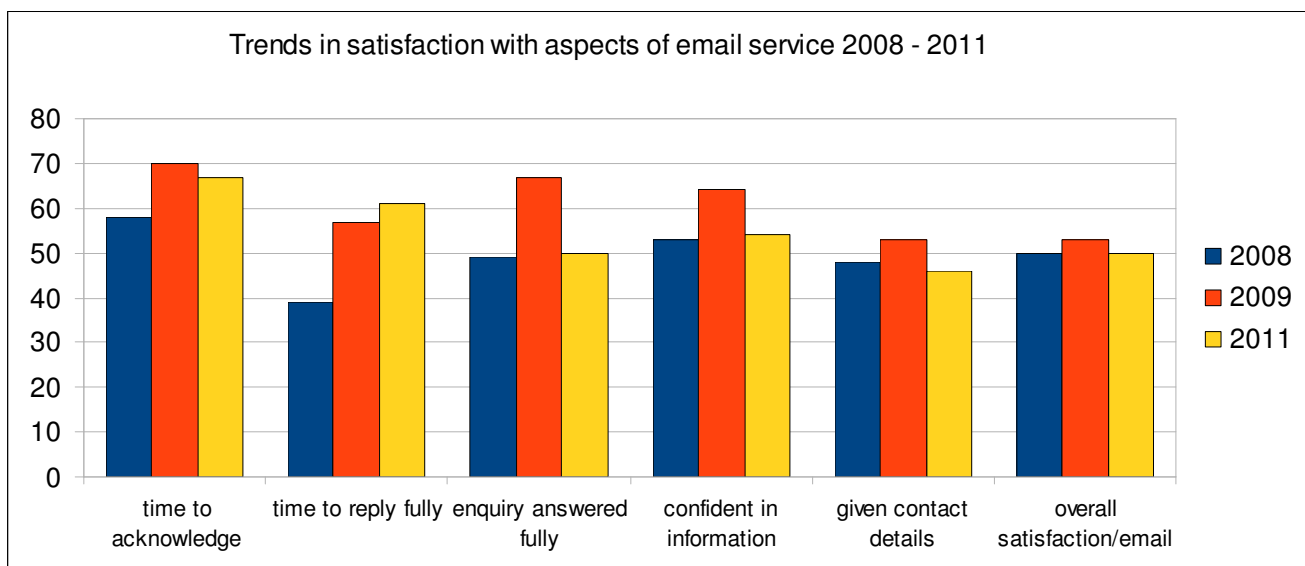
24. Compared to satisfaction with telephone service, visiting and even letter this is clearly not satisfactory and improvement in email contact should be a high priority for improvement.

25. Our service standards say that email customers should receive an acknowledgement in one working day and a full response in 10 working days. According to this survey only 37 per cent said that they received an acknowledgement in this time (down 12 per cent) and 16 per cent said they didn't receive an acknowledgement at all (up five per cent).

26. 64 per cent of respondents got a response within 10 days. For eight per cent it took more than 10 working days, and 19 per cent said that they didn't get a response to their email at all (up 10 per cent).

27. Customers generally expect a much quicker response to email compared to other contact methods, and this is often why they chose to use this method. Given these higher expectations our service standard is very relaxed, so even if we were fully compliant we would expect lower levels of satisfaction with this channel. This is not the case as satisfaction with time taken to reply fully has increased slightly. This is an issue for further consideration when we come to review our standards.

28. The graph below shows levels of satisfaction with other aspects of email contact.



29. Scores were broadly similar or slightly better than the last survey for:

- satisfaction with time taken to acknowledge and reply
- information given on who to contact with further questions
- overall satisfaction with response received

However, overall satisfaction with the response received is low at just 50 per cent; and there are worrying downwards trends on enquiry answered fully and confidence in the information customers are being given.

## Visitors

30. Our service standard states that we will see visitors with an appointment promptly. To help us measure performance against this standard, we use feedback cards in reception. Capita includes copies of those cards with its monthly reception report, and any issues raised are brought to the attention of the relevant team either by Capita staff or by the client monitoring officer (Head of HR, IT and Customer Services).

31. 60 per cent of survey respondents had not visited the council offices in the last year. Of those who had 14 per cent said that their enquiry was dealt with by reception staff, 10 per cent by a mix of reception and back office staff.

32. 93 per cent of those who visited were satisfied with the way they were dealt with by reception staff (up 13 per cent).

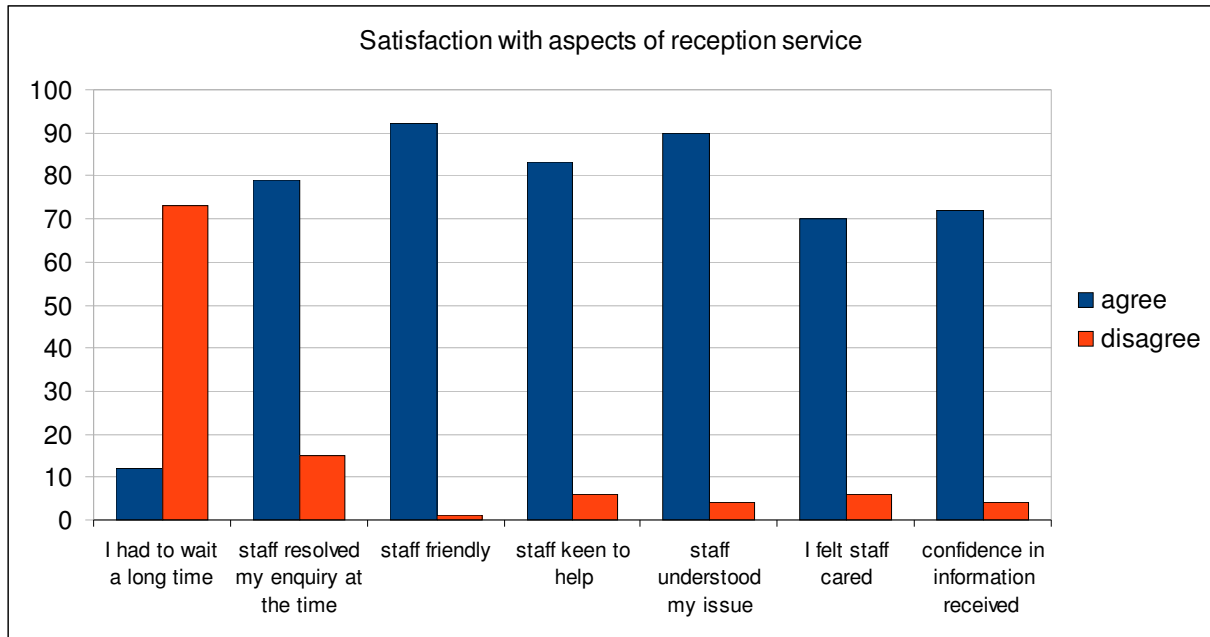
33. On the whole, satisfaction levels remain very high for customers visiting the council. Across the following factors satisfaction has remained consistent with last time we surveyed:

- time taken to resolve the enquiry
- enquiries resolved
- staff friendliness
- staff keen to help
- staff understood the issue
- staff cared about the issue

34. The number of people who said they *did not* have to wait a long time before they saw the member of staff they wanted to speak to is up by 12 per cent (now 73 per cent), which is positive.

35. The only factor where performance has gone down is on confidence that the information staff are giving is right – which dropped 10 per cent (to 72 per cent).

36. This years results are shown in the chart below



37. Our service standard says that we will see all visitors without an appointment within 15 minutes, but if we cannot resolve the enquiry we will make an appointment or arrange for someone to call the customer to resolve it. Only 21 per cent of customers had an appointment. Of those customers who did not have an appointment only 12 per cent said they waited longer than 15 minutes.

## Letters

38. Only two per cent of customers had contacted the council by letter. Of these 76 per cent said they received an acknowledgement within two weeks.

39. 60 per cent said that they received a response in less than two weeks (up 10 per cent); nine per cent did not receive a response at all (down from 30 per cent), a significant improvement on last time.

40. All teams are required to record letters received and time taken to respond to these in accordance with our service standard which says we will provide a full response within 10 working days. In 2010 we received 2205 letters which needed a response, of these 343 took longer than 10 working days for a response.<sup>1</sup>

## Actions

41. The period of change as restructures were put in place and bedding down may have contributed to some of the findings addressed in this report, and we would expect this to resolve itself now that most structures are in place. Similarly the new waste contract is bedding down and issues around this are being resolved – this should reduce the amount of contact on waste issues experienced early on when staff in the team were under considerable pressure to respond to the volume of contact experienced.

<sup>1</sup> Three teams submitted none or partially completed monitoring information



42. We are currently working with different service standards across the two councils, which is not ideal given that often the same staff are working across the two, and this could lead to confusion. We have scheduled a review and harmonisation of service standards for spring 2012. Once this is complete we will carry out a programme of internal communication. However, in advance of the review we will remind staff of the current service standards, especially those relating to email contact, and the results of this monitoring.
43. In addition we have identified the following actions which will help to address the areas for improvement identified in this report.

- encourage staff to take up existing email good practice training available through the corporate training programme
- feed email and customer service considerations into corporate time management training and encourage staff to attend
- include further customer service training in the corporate training programme
- remind teams of the need to keep staff contact details up to date on the electronic 'whos who'
- encourage teams to implement the electronic message monitoring system
- introduce telephone monitoring reports
- remind staff and audit signatures on external email
- consider the business case for reintroducing mystery shopping in relation to email contact
- ensure that all teams are completing and reporting on regular letter monitoring.

## **Financial and legal Implications**

44. There are no financial or legal implications arising from this report.

## **Risks**

45. The key risk is a reputational one as customer experience is a recognised driver of overall satisfaction with the council. Poor performance could impact upon our customer satisfaction results overall as measured by our residents survey and our reputation generally.

## **Other Implications**

46. None

## Conclusion

47. This is the third customer service performance report of this kind, showing results from our recent citizens' panel survey which asked about peoples experiences of contacting the council. It compares responses received to the councils customer service standards. Results show that satisfaction with our overall customer service is improving. However, there are some significant areas for improvement. Most disappointing is that satisfaction with most aspects of email contact is down despite work done after last years report to try to improve email contact. This continues to be our most significant area for improvement. Another significant area for improvement is around availability of staff in the back office to respond to telephone calls. The report sets out actions proposed to address these and other areas for improvement identified.

## Background Papers

- Report of citizens' panel survey 19, January 2011
- Previous citizens' panel reports 11 (2008) and 16 (2009)

# **Appendix One – Customer service standards**

## **Telephone**

Wherever possible we will ensure that your call is answered by a member of staff, we will only transfer calls to voicemail in exceptional circumstances.

We aim to answer calls within six rings.

If the person you need to speak to is not available, we will arrange for them to call you back.

We will respond to telephone messages within one working day, unless otherwise agreed with you.

## **Email**

We will acknowledge all emails that require acknowledgement within one working day.

Where it will take longer than one working day to provide a full response we will provide a full response within 10 working days or as agreed.

## **Visitors**

We see all visitors to the Council Offices with an appointment promptly.

We will see all visitors to the Council Offices, who do not have an appointment, within 15 minutes.

We will always try to answer your queries on the day you visit, but if this is not possible, we will arrange an appointment for you to discuss it in person, or arrange for someone to telephone you.

## **Letters**

We will respond to all letters within 10 working days.

Where it will take longer than 10 working days to provide a full response we will write to tell you when we will be able to provide a full response

## **Generally:**

We will always be welcoming, and deal with customers politely and professionally in accordance with our promises above.

We will treat all our customers equally, and do all we can to ensure that you are able to access our services.

We will deal openly and honestly with our customers, we will explain why we are taking a particular course of action and what the timescales are likely to be.

And if things go wrong – we will take all complaints seriously, and will respond promptly in accordance with our agreed complaints procedure