

**REPORT OF SERVICE DIRECTOR –HR AND CUSTOMER SERVICE.****UPDATE ON THE CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE****Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of the report is to update members as to developments at the Customer Service Centre; including the proposed change of telephone number.

**Information and Advice****Background**

2. Since April 2009 the average number of enquiries dealt with through the Customer Service Centre has increased from 256,848 per annum to a forecast volume of approximately 630,000 per annum for 2012/13. This includes face to face enquiries, email and telephone enquiries. This is set against a backdrop of budget decrease for the Customer Service Centre for the same period from £5.6m to £2.88m.
3. This reflects a cross-cutting programme of activity working directly with front line service areas to review service provision, systems and processes and transfer first line enquiry handling activity to the Customer Service Centre to be dealt with by trained customer service specialists where appropriate. Thus generating savings in front line service areas and releasing the capacity of trained, professional staff to deal with higher level assessments and more complex enquiries in their areas of work.
4. Examples of new or developments in existing areas of enquiry handling transferred to the Customer Service Centre in the last 12 months include:

Family Information Service

School Admissions Service

Instrument and music teaching services

Nottinghamshire performing arts service

Handypersons Adaptations Service

Blue car badges

Carers emergency card

First contact service

Establishment of the Dedicated Adult Access Team

Welfare Rights Advice as part of the above team

Registrar appointments and calls as part of the national "Tell us once" campaign

Highways – integration of systems for direct reporting of potholes and street lighting repairs

Issue of special access permits  
Development of e-payments system – ongoing  
Involvement in development of Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

5. At the same time work has also been undertaken by the customer service team to generate improvements in efficiency and streamlining of enquiry handling at the centre to reduce average call duration from 6.00 minutes to 3.59 minutes – depending on the nature of the enquiry. Further improvements are anticipated once the new call routing software and improvements in the customer management system have bedded in. The average cost per contact at the Customer Service Centre has also reduced from £12.22 in March 2010 to £4.86 on average by September 2011. This includes complex Adult Social Care enquiries.

#### **The Customer Service “golden” number.**

6. The Customer Service Centre acquired the 08449 808080 number as part of the initial set up and launch in 2007 with a view to this becoming the “golden number” and main route for contacting Nottinghamshire County Council and access to services. The intention being to provide a main “front door” through which the public could access Council services with trained Customer Service Advisors able to deal with and resolve first line enquiries quickly and efficiently and signpost to other services as necessary.
7. The advantage of this approach at the time was there was no fee for the Authority in terms of line rental or charges and as it is a non-geographic number it could be moved to other locations to ensure business continuity in the event of an emergency. This number is now widely known by the public of Nottinghamshire as a co-ordinated route through which they can access over 440 of the Council’s 500 different services.
8. Calls to the County Council are now costing customers on average 3 pence per minute from a landline and considerably more from mobile phone networks. There is an incorrect perception amongst citizens that the County Council benefits from these charges but this charge is levied by the customer’s telephone provider and not the County Council. Increasing numbers of customers wish to use the convenience of their mobile phone to contact the Council but, depending on the customer’s call package, this can be expensive for the customer; particularly if the call is complex in nature or lengthy. Increasingly feedback and complaints are being received from customers about call charges.
9. The Office of Communications (OFCOM) now recommends the use of 0300 numbers as the best practice option for use by local government and not for profit organisations. These are widely used across Nottinghamshire in both the police and health arenas. Therefore the County Council has purchased an 0300 number to replace the previous golden number. The new number is 0300 500 8080.
10. This will reduce costs for members of the public contacting the Customer Service Centre as call charges from both landlines and mobile phones will be equivalent to dialling a local number. Depending on which provider and call package the customer has these calls may even be free of charge. The County Council would be setting an example for other providers and will hopefully improve customer perception and satisfaction with the Council overall as we will have listened to customer feedback by reducing costs for our customers and ensuring that the public receive improved value for money.

11. The 0300 number will continue to provide continuity of service in emergency situations as it is also non- geographic so can be moved to another location with ease.
12. The new “golden number” which has been purchased is similar to the existing number and hopefully therefore easy for the public to remember. Its launch on 5<sup>th</sup> November 2012 will be supported by a comprehensive communications plan. The new number has been set up so that anyone ringing the old number will be automatically diverted to the new, cheaper number.
13. The cost of this approach is £750 one off cost to purchase the line and for the initial set up plus line rental of £6.00 per year. Work to change the numbers already advertised will be undertaken as part of the marketing and branding project or as literature is planned for review and reprint and therefore this should avoid additional costs.
14. The change in the “golden number” is part of the Council’s wider approach to access to services which supports the use of a wide range of channels by customers to access information and services to ensure that customers retain a degree of choice and control over how they contact the County Council and that particular groups are not disadvantaged. Underpinning this is the requirement for all access channels and supporting systems and processes to be accessible, fit for purpose, represent value for money and be targeted according to the customer audience. This includes face to face customer service provision, email and written access to services and information; telephone enquiries and the use of the internet.
15. As part of the next phase of activity of the Improvement Programme, the Council is seeking to encourage and support customers to make greater use of digital channels where appropriate through a series of targeted actions over a period of time. Access to services on-line is cheaper and enables greater self service by customers at a time which is convenient for them, not just during office hours, and allows more proactive pushing out of information to customers. Progress is being made in this area with significant increases in the number of customers accessing the Council’s redesigned and improved website in recent months. However, this will still need to be supported by the full range of access routes as it will take some time to deliver significant changes in customer behaviour and it will always be appropriate to offer a range of channels depending on the nature of the enquiry and to ensure a degree of choice for customers.

### **Other Options Considered**

16. A range of options are being considered and developed as part of the County Council’s developing strategy for access to services which encourages and supports the use of cheaper access channels where possible and appropriate but still retains a degree of customer choice.

### **Reason/s for Recommendation/s**

17. The purchase and use of a new 0300 number is directly in response to feedback from customers; will reduce costs for customers and is in line with industry best practice guidance for local government. This sits within the Council’s overall approach of ensuring that all access channels are fit for purpose and provide value for money and then encouraging the

public to move from face to face access to services, to telephone enquiry handling and ultimately on-line self service access to information and services where this is appropriate and customers choose to do so.

## **Statutory and Policy Implications**

This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, equal opportunities, human resources, crime and disorder, human rights, the safeguarding of children, sustainability and the environment and those using the service and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

### **Implications for Service Users**

A significant number of service user are vulnerable, disadvantaged or on low incomes. The new number will mean that it is cheaper for the public and customers to access Council Services as they will be charged less by their telephone provider. The County Council will continue to develop its approach to ensure customers continue to be able to exercise choice in how they access services and improve the overall customer experience.

### **Equalities Implications**

The County Council provides a wide range of services to citizens, businesses and visitors to Nottinghamshire. It is important that the County Council continues to provide a range of channels and routes through which all customers can access information and services in order to ensure that particular groups are not disadvantaged.

### **Human Resources Implications**

There are none arising directly from the contents of the report.

## **RECOMMENDATION/S**

That members note the contents of the report.

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**For any enquiries about this report please contact:**  
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**Constitutional Comments [CEH 08/10/12]**

The report is for noting purposes only.

**Financial Comments [MA 08/10/12]**

The financial implications are as detailed in the report.

**Background Papers**

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

None

**Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected**

All