

Agenda Item	9
Report No	CP/17/25

The Highland Council

Committee: Communities and Place

Date: 14 August 2025

Report Title: Customer Services Update

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Customer Service network consists of 16 Service Points and 1 Contact Centre, with 12 of the Service Points also providing a dual role as Registrars. The Customer Service team provides direct support to the public to access Council services. They work on behalf of all services across the organisation.
- 1.2 This report provides Members with an update of the work of Customer Services across Highland, providing Pay, Report and Request access for Council services. The report provides details of the statistics and performance for the financial year 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025.
- 1.3 The report also provides information on the work of the Customer Service team and highlights proposed and ongoing developments and improvements as to continue to shape customer-centric service provision. This includes the work of the team in relation to the My Council Programme which is part of the Council's Delivery Plan.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to **consider** and **note**:-
 - i. the work and performance of the customer service network; and
 - ii. the improvement work completed and planned.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - there are no direct resource implications as a result of the report.
- 3.2 **Legal** - there are no direct legal implications as a result of the report.
- 3.3 **Risk** - there are no identified risks arising from the report.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** - there are no direct health and safety implications as a result of the report.

3.5 **Gaelic** - there are no direct Gaelic implications as a result of the report.

4 Impacts - Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies, or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2 This is an update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 Background

5.1 The Customer Service network consists of 16 Service Points and 1 Contact Centre, with 12 of the Service Points also providing a dual role as Registrars. The Customer Service team provides direct support to the public to access Council services. They work on behalf of all services across the organisation.

5.2 The Contact Centre operates Monday to Friday 8am to 5pm while the Service Points operate a mixture of opening hours to manage both their in-person Service Point duties and Registration business.

5.3 Along with Pay, Report and Request a Council Service, the team are also responsible for the administration of the Blue Badge and National Entitlement Card (Bus Pass) schemes. The team also provide the statutory registration of births, deaths, and marriages. The annual report on this aspect of the service will be considered by this Committee in November.

5.4 The staffing profile of the network by FTE is: -

Contact Centre:-

- 1 x Operations Manager;
- 3.7 X Customer Service Officer; and
- 13.2 x Customer Service Assistant

Service Points:-

- 2 x Operations Manager
- 6 x Customer Service Officer
- 28 x Customer Service Assistant/Assistant Registrar
- 4 x Customer Service Assistant

5.5 This report provides an update on the nature and performance of the Customer Services team. It also outlines areas of improvement progressed and planned, including how this links to the My Council Delivery Plan Programme.

6 Performance Statistics and Data

- 6.1 During the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 the Contact Centre answered 149,034 calls with an average speed of answer of 9 minutes 35 seconds. This equates to a weekly call answered rate of 2,922. This performance varies throughout the year and is dependent upon a range of external factors which are discussed further below. Current performance for Quarter 1 2025/26 speed of answer is 5 minutes and 28 seconds. According to recent research conducted by Microsoft UK, the average speed of answer across all sectors ranges from 2 minutes 3 secs (TELCO) to 35 minutes 34 Seconds (Utilities). **Appendix 1** details the call volume offered by service area and an update on the latest performance, in light of a range of improvement activity, is detailed in section 7.
- 6.2 There are many factors that can influence the number of calls the Council receives including weather related incidents and changes to Council services (such as the changes to household waste collections and seasonal activities). The new Waste rollout programme which commenced in March 2024 resulted in an extra 28,000 calls offered to the contact centre. After the first phase of roll-out, Customer Services analysed the data on customer interactions. This informed an approach whereby Customer Services recruited 2 full-time temporary staff to the dedicated Waste phone lines to minimise the impact to other services, manage the call volume driven by the roll-out campaign and support customers with enquiries about the roll-out.
- 6.3 In 2024/25, the Service Point network took more than 30,000 Pay, Report and Request transactions as well as the Registration of 3,923 Birth, Death, and Marriage events.
- 6.4 There has been change in customer behaviour since 2020, and Customer Services have experienced an average 57% drop in in-person transactions. The majority of these involve payments where there has been a significant increase to direct debit, online, and automated telephony payments. There has been an over 30% increase to payments via the automated payment line for rent and council tax which is available 24 hours a day. The customer appetite for self-service options has been evident through the engagement carried out within the Customer Experience Strategy project and enabling greater self-serve options is a key outcome of the My Council programme overall.
- 6.5 Enabled by technology, the Customer Services network utilises resources across Highland to distribute workload for maximum efficiencies. The team have adapted working practices to facilitate Contact Centre calls across all Service Point locations when required, the redistribution of workstreams such as bus pass and email enquiries from the Contact Centre and the ability to provide Registration tasks from any Highland location. This has enabled Customer Services to review workload to resource models to meet processing demands and improve customer experience.
- 6.6 The Contact Centre is also responsible for the administration of the Blue Badge scheme as directed by Transport for Scotland, following a comprehensive code of practice. There are currently 12,775 live badges in Highland.
- 6.7 In the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025, 6,421 blue badges were issued, a 40% increase to the previous year. Customer Services can correlate this with the informative approach taken when social security issue award of a social security benefit, which qualifies the individual to an automatic award of a blue badge, hence more people are educated at point of benefit award.

6.8 Blue badge processing time can take up to 12 weeks where an application requires to be referred for an Independent Mobility Assessment (IMA). IMA's are conducted on our behalf by NSH Highland Occupational Therapist.

6.9 Inverness Service Point is the lead administrator for the National Entitlement Card (NEC) scheme as well as Parking Permits in Highland, on behalf of the Roads and Transport service. In the same reporting period 13,343 NEC cards were issued and 2,376 Permits.

7 Improvements

7.1 The service has been adapting to new ways of working to respond to changes in customer behaviour as detailed above in section 6.4.

7.2 Telephony

In November 2023, the Contact Centre telephony system was migrated onto RingCentral CCaaS (contact centre as a solution) providing a new suite of tools to aid the management of contacts. After the initial deployment additional modules were implemented, Quality Management (QM) and Workforce Management (WFM).

7.3 The RingCentral CCaaS QM tool enhances assistant performance by enabling supervisors to monitor interactions, provide targeted feedback, and identify areas for improvement in both communication and processes. It supports improved customer experiences by addressing service gaps and ensuring consistent, high-quality support. The tool also aids in compliance and risk management by ensuring adherence to scripts, protocols, and regulations. Additionally, it can help contribute to broader organisational improvements by analysing data related to pay, report, and service request interactions. This has informed service redesign and process improvements in collaboration with service colleagues. For example, the current review of Housing Options processes with the view to create an intuitive reporting form, created around policy. This collects the correct data and allows Customer Services to triage contacts at front end to ensure that referrals are received by the correct resolver group.

7.4 RingCentral CCaaS WFM offers a comprehensive suite of tools aimed at optimising staff performance, enhancing customer experience, and improving operational efficiency. With customisable analytic dashboards that can provide real-time insights into workload and service levels, enabling data-driven operational decisions. The ability to schedule off-line time allows the team to work smarter when planning for leave and training, by using historical data to identify quieter periods for staff development minimising any effects to service quality. This has allowed the team to flex staff resources to meet unexpected service demands and proactively manage resource against predicted call volumes to achieve the best possible service standards.

7.5 Forecasting and scheduling tools help align staffing with service demand, improving productivity and response times. These features have led to better staff engagement, particularly in adherence to schedules. Additionally, WFM has allowed the team to support cross-service collaboration by using analytical data to inform resource planning, as demonstrated during major initiatives like the new waste rollout programme.

- 7.6 In March 2025, Customer Services implemented a 15-minute line closure warning for any calls in queue 15 minutes prior to closing time. This has made a positive impact to end of day call flow management. The next planned improvement is to deploy the function of an estimated wait time message when customers are in a queued state. This solution is being worked through by technical teams from RingCentral and ICT Telecoms. This feature has been planned since the migration to CCaaS and will be a welcome tool to aid the management of calls and help customers to make informed decisions.
- 7.7 The Contact Centre has implemented a range of call control techniques to optimise resource allocation and significantly reduce the average speed of answer. For Quarter 1 2025/26 this is 5 minutes and 28 seconds. Through robust analysis of customer behaviour, Customer Services have made data informed decisions to better meet the needs of the public.
- 7.8 Key strategies applied to improve the performance include:-
- Informative Messaging: Educating customers on channel choice and alternative ways to access our services, helping them make informed choices about how they can interact with us.
 - Proactive Information Delivery: By understanding the most frequently requested services, Customer Services anticipate customer needs and provide relevant information before they enter the queue - often resolving queries at the earliest opportunity.
 - Queue Management Enhancements: Queue Jumping for priority cases and Emergency Call Control Messaging to manage high-demand scenarios.
 - Smarter Use of Phone Options to route calls to the most appropriate team member.

These measures ensure that calls are directed efficiently, enabling quicker resolutions and improving the overall customer experience.

7.9 **My Council**

Customer Services are actively involved in all aspects of the My Council Programme (MCP) and were a key stakeholder in the development of the Customer Experience Strategy. Improvements referred to above are driven from the MCP and Customer Experience Strategy to create better customer experiences from initial contact through to resolution. The Customer Experience Strategy applies to all Council services and processes and the underpinning vision of “putting the customer at the centre of what we do” will ensure that service redesign and new process introduction where initial contact starts in the Customer Service network will improve the customer journey and experience of accessing Council services.

- 7.10 The redesign of the website is a further opportunity to deliver improved customer journey and aid the streamlining of processes where access by any means (telephone, digital, in person) delivers the same experience and outcomes by contacting the right resolver team first time. The function for reporting non-emergency Housing repairs online was highlighted through the MCP end-to-end Customer journey workstream and this option is currently in an active workplan.
- 7.11 The Housing Repairs process was chosen to map through an end-to-end customer experience and produce a proforma for service redesign in line with the ethos of the My Council programme and particularly the Customer Experience Strategy. This process was chosen as it has the highest volume for front-end customer contact.

- 7.12 The end-to-end journey mapping was completed in a LEAN review style to assess the Housing Repairs customer journey current process and from this identify where process and general service improvements may be made.
- 7.13 The project team gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. This has led to a number of recommendations being discussed with the Housing team. One of these is the development of an online Repairs form which will meet objectives of the Customer Experience Strategy and significantly improve the customer journey.

8. Next Steps

- 8.1 The Customer Service team will continue to adopt an improvement approach to service delivery, ensuring the team can respond to changing customer behaviour whilst at the same time supporting and sustaining traditional methods of service delivery.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 17 July 2025

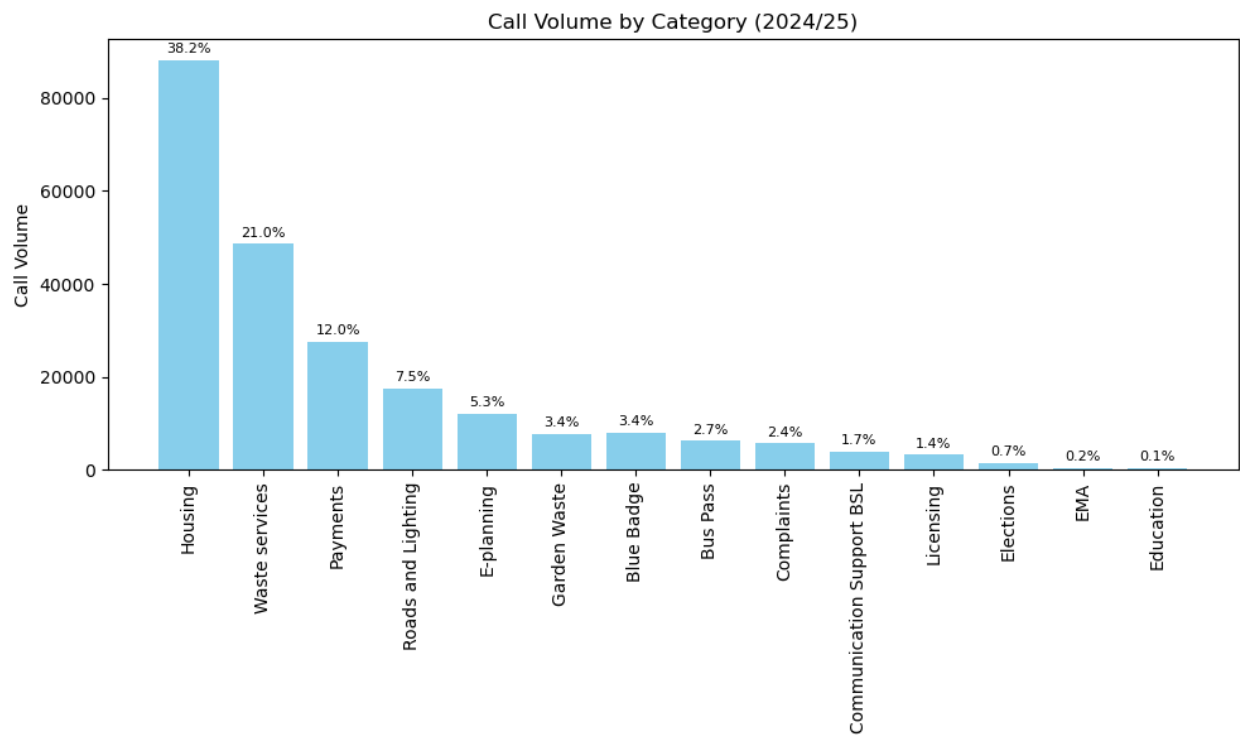
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Background Papers: None

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Contact Centre Call Volume by Service
Appendix 2 – Case Study – Postal Votes Risk 2024

Appendix 1 Council Contact Centre Call Volume Report

1. Calls by Category



2. Number and Percentage of Calls by Service Function

Category	Number of Calls	Percentage of Total Calls
Housing	88,262	38.2%
Waste services	48,629	21.0%
Payments	27,629	12.0%
Roads and Lighting	17,409	7.5%
E-planning	12,137	5.3%
Garden Waste	7,781	3.4%
Blue Badge	7,910	3.4%
Bus Pass	6,227	2.7%
Complaints	5,645	2.4%
Communication Support BSL	3,912	1.7%
Licensing	3,252	1.4%
Elections	1,507	0.7%
EMA	420	0.2%
Education	330	0.1%

Case Study: Postal Votes – June 2024

Background

In June 2024, a significant risk was identified nationally concerning postal votes ahead of the UK General Election. This posed a potential threat to voter confidence and required immediate, clear, and coordinated communication to the public.

Challenge

The primary challenge was to deliver timely, accurate, and accessible information to the public across multiple channels, while also preparing for a potential increase in enquiries.

Solution

A cross-functional team was formed, bringing together experts from:

- **Elections**
- **Customer Service**
- **Telecoms**
- **Corporate Communications**

This collaboration enabled the development and implementation of a **streamlined public communications strategy**.

Key elements included:

- **Daily Adaptive Messaging:** A flexible messaging plan was created, allowing updates to be made in real-time as events unfolded.
- **Plain English Communication:** All public messages were crafted in clear, accessible language with strong calls to action.
- **Social Media & Telephony:** Messaging was co-ordinated across social media platforms and the public helpline to ensure consistency.
- **Emergency Helpline Activation:** An emergency weekend helpline was rapidly deployed, with updated call scripts and management protocols implemented under tight deadlines.

Results

The initiative delivered measurable success:

- **87%** of callers reported satisfaction with the information provided via the automated system.
- **100%** of callers who needed to speak with an advisor were successfully connected.
- The **RingCentral telephony platform** proved instrumental, offering the flexibility needed to adapt quickly and effectively.

Legacy & Impact

The success of this initiative established a **blueprint for future informative communication**. The same strategic approach and telephony setup were later used to support the rollout of the **twin-streaming waste initiative**, demonstrating the effectiveness of the model.