

Agenda Item	14
Report No	CP/24/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Communities and Place

Date: 13 August 2026

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 2025 to 31 March 2026. Section 6 of this report confirms improved performance in 25/26 in regard to call-handling process and responses.

2 Recommendations

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

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 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.

4.3 This is a monitoring and 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 as of 1 July 2026 by FTE (Full-Time Equivalent) is:-

Contact Centre:-

- 1 x Operations Manager;
- 3.7 x Customer Service Officer; and
- 14.5 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 2025 to 31 March 2026 the Contact Centre answered 140,540 calls (a reduction of 8,494 (5.7%) on the previous year) with an average speed of answer of 7 minutes 27 seconds, which is an improvement of 2 minutes 8 seconds from the previous year. The reduction in calls answered correlates to the overall reduction in calls offered which was 15% less than the previous year. **Appendix 1** details by service area calls offered and answered.

6.2 There are many factors that can influence the number of calls the Council receives including:-

- weather related incidents;
- changes to Council services or campaigns. These include the garden waste permit period, the recent Scottish Parliamentary Election, and the successful conclusion of the Waste twin-streaming and route optimisation programmes.

The conclusion of the Waste programmes saw a reduction in calls offered to the contact centre of 9,023 (19%) based on the previous year.

6.3 In 2025/26, the Service Point network took more than 35,000 Pay, Report and Request transactions as well as the Registration of 4,009 Birth, Death, and Marriage events.

6.4 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 13,331 live badges in Highland as of 3 July 2026.

6.5 In the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026, 5,244 blue badges were issued, an 18.3% decrease to the previous year. Customer Services can correlate this reduction with a person-centred approach to badge duration award. Previously badges were being issued for 12 months and are now being considered for up to 24 months, to take into consideration the current NHS wait times for operations such as joint replacements.

6.6 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 Highland's behalf by the NHS Highland Occupational Therapy Team.

6.7 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 Parking service. In the same reporting period, 12,264 NEC cards were issued and 2,511 Permits. The successful management and processing of travel card applications and enquiries over the past year have seen a direct reduction in calls offered to the service centre (28%) and improved customer experience.

7 Improvements

7.1 Payments

7.1.1 In August 2026 the Council completed the implementation of PCI Pal, a solution to ensure compliance with Payment Card Industry (PCI) standards for card payments via telephone. This initiative enables customers to make payments over the telephone in a secure and compliant manner, ensuring that card details are not disclosed to or recorded by staff, thereby significantly enhancing data protection and reducing organisational risk.

7.1.2 Customer Services, as the primary team responsible for processing telephone payments, were a key stakeholder in the successful implementation of PCI compliance for card payments.

The project operated within a challenging and compressed timeframe. Customer Services provided critical expertise and support throughout this transition, not only within the Service Centre but across all service areas that accept payments by telephone.

7.1.3 Through this collaborative approach, Customer Services played a pivotal role in ensuring that all relevant services were equipped to continue taking payments safely and effectively. This demonstrates the value of Customer Services as a corporate enabler, supporting critical compliance work while maintaining high standards of customer service and operational continuity.

7.2 Elections

7.2.1 Further to the previous report to Committee, which outlined the successful delivery during the UK Parliamentary Election and the use of contact centre tools, there has been further improvement. Through close collaboration between the Elections Team and the Telecoms Team, the functionality of the election phone line has been enhanced, demonstrating how effective cross-service working and full utilisation of existing systems can deliver meaningful improvements for customers.

7.2.2 The election line now includes the following features:-

- **Spoken Ballot Paper:** Callers can now listen to a “spoken ballot,” supporting customers who are visually impaired or who are unable to access information online. This improves accessibility and promotes greater inclusion in the democratic process.
- **Improved Call Triage:** Customers whose enquiries relate to voter registration are now given the option to be directed straight to the Electoral Registration Office. This aligns with our Customer Experience Strategy by enabling first point of contact resolution and ensuring customers speak directly to the team best placed to assist them.
- **Priority Queue Function:** A queue prioritisation function has been introduced for calls entering the Service Centre via the election line. This ensures calls are answered promptly and reduces the risk of customers being disadvantaged, for example where urgent support is required for replacement postal votes.

- 7.2.3 These enhancements demonstrate how leveraging existing tools, alongside collaborative working across teams, can deliver tangible improvements to customer experience and accessibility. As a result, calls to the election helpline since April 2026 to date have been answered in an average time of 1 minute 30 seconds.

7.3 **Call waiting times and customer experience improvements**

- 7.3.1 As reported last year, work is underway to introduce estimated wait times across the Council's Service Centre. This will provide customers with clearer information on how long they will wait for their call to be answered, enabling informed choices about whether to remain in the queue or call back. Implementation has proven to be complex due to varying call volumes, telephony infrastructure set up, multiple helplines, and staffing structures. However, good progress is being made with a target to introduce this improvement by October 2026.
- 7.3.2 From 11 June 2026, calls from tenants dialling 01349 886602 (the Council's Housing tenant contact number) and selecting option 2 (existing repairs) are now routed directly to the Repairs Scheduling Team. This ensures that customers are connected at the first point of contact with the service best placed to manage enquiries relating to repairs that have already been logged.
- 7.3.3 This change supports the Council's One Highland approach and aligns with the objectives set out in the Customer Experience Strategy, focusing on simplifying customer journeys and improving service responsiveness. Delivering this service in partnership with the Service Centre, whilst maintaining a frontline delivery model, supports a range of strategic benefits and outcomes, including enhanced customer experience, improved operational efficiency, and more effective use of Council resources.
- 7.3.4 The revised call routing arrangements are expected to deliver several key benefits which we are continuing to monitor:-
- Improved customer experience through reduced waiting times and minimised call transfers;
 - Increased first-contact resolution, enabling quicker responses to tenant enquiries;
 - Enhanced access to information, including updates on repair status and appointment scheduling;
 - More efficient use of resources, reducing unnecessary demand on the Service Centre;
 - Improved data and insight, supporting better demand management and service planning.

7.4 **My Council**

- 7.4.1 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.
- 7.4.2 As reported to this committee last year, 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.
- 7.4.3 Alongside our wider Housing and ICT colleagues we are developing an online non-emergency repair reporting form, supporting a single, system-led approach for all repair requests. This will enable tenants to access services online for non-emergency repairs, where and when they choose, reducing reliance on phone contact. The approach will ensure all repairs are logged through the system, improving consistency, auditability, and data quality, while avoiding duplication and confusion caused by separate processes.
- 7.4.4 The key benefits this will make are:-
- Increased channel choice for tenants, allowing those who prefer to self-serve online to do so;
 - Reduced pressure on contact centre phone lines, helping alleviate call bottlenecks and allow those who cannot report online a more accessible service;
 - Improved availability for customers with urgent or complex needs who need to speak to an advisor;
 - More efficient and consistent handling of repairs through a single, end-to-end process;
 - Better reporting, tracking, and contractor management through full system visibility;
 - Improved accessibility for those who cannot use a phone or access a service point.

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: 13 July 2026

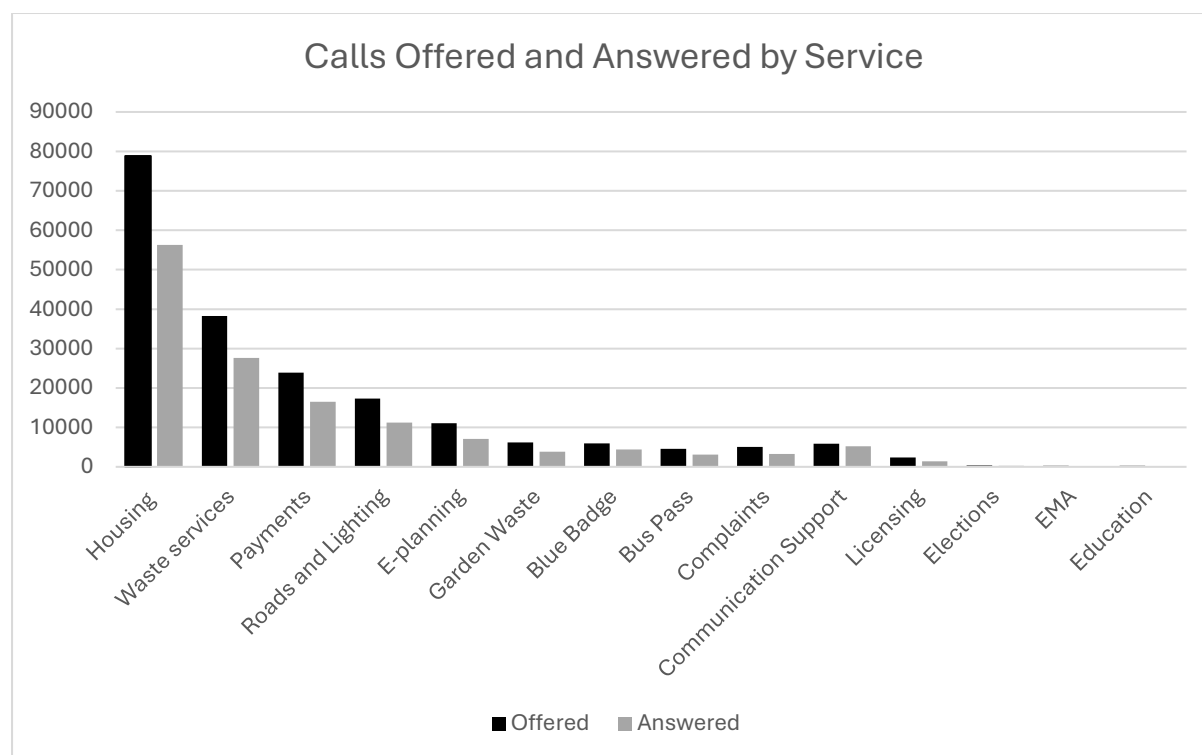
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Background Papers: None

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Contact Centre Call Volume by Service

Appendix 1 Council Contact Centre Call Volume Report

1. Calls by Service



2. Number and Percentage of Calls by Service

Service	Offered	Answered	% Answered
Housing	78820	56295	71%
Waste services	38297	27622	72%
Payments	23894	16522	69%
Roads and Lighting	17338	11221	65%
E-planning	11051	7072	64%
Garden Waste	6152	3874	63%
Blue Badge	5984	4435	74%
Bus Pass	4541	3068	68%
Complaints	5064	3227	64%
Communication Support	5891	5191	88%
Licensing	2339	1425	61%
Elections	350	283	81%
EMA	244	163	67%
Education	230	142	62%
Total	200195	140540	70%