Aylesbury Vale
District Council

Internal Audit Report 2019/20

Digital Contact Team

November 2019

FINAL

Contents

Distribution List	
For action	Hazel Hutt – Group Manager, Customer Relationship Emily Fymruk – Team Manager Kerry Porter – Assistant Team Manager
For information	Jeff Membery – Assistant Director, Customer Fulfilment Audit Committee

This report has been prepared only for Aylesbury Vale District Council in accordance with the agreed terms of reference. The findings should not be relied upon by any other organisation.

1. *Executive summary*

Report classification*	Total number of findings					
		Critical	High	Medium	Low	Advisory
Low Risk (3 points)	Control design	-	-	-	3	-
	Operating effectiveness	-	-	-	-	-
	Total	**-**	**-**	**-**	**3**	**-**

*We only report by exception, which means that we only raise a finding / recommendation when we identify a potential weakness in the design or operating effectiveness of control that could put the objectives of the service at risk. The definition of finding ratings is set out in Appendix 2.

Summary of findings

This report is classified as low risk and we identified three low risk findings.

The Digital Contact Team assist with a variety of requests, including those relating to Waste, Environmental Health, Housing, Parking and Customer Fulfilment. The Housing Benefits and Rates and Recovery teams have their own contact teams, however the Digital Contact Team can provide support during particularly busy periods.

Whilst the Customer Contact Team have good knowledge of all Council areas and services, we found that there is not a coordinated approach in place for communicating with the other Council departments. One low risk finding reflects this and notes that opportunities for improving public information by using data from customer engagement to enhance the availability of commonly required information are not exploited. There is therefore some risk to the accuracy of the information provided to customers. This also creates inefficiency and hinders opportunities for channel shift; improving publicly available information would mean that customers could obtain the information they require themselves.

The audit also notes that whilst phone calls and web chats are occasionally reviewed and feedback is provided to the Digital Contact Team, this procedure is not performed in a consistent manner and on a regular basis.

This audit has not covered other customer contact routes outside of the Digital Contact Team, however there is an opportunity to apply these findings to other customer contact teams.

Our findings are summarised as follows:

- There is not a mechanism in place for analysing customer engagement data and reporting common themes, trends and problems to the Council's departments (Finding 1 – Low)

- Our sample testing identified one case where the agent did not promote self-serve through the Council's website or 'My Account' and we found that there is not a structured and consistent approach in place for reviewing, supervising and monitoring customer engagement (Finding 2 – Low)

- The Council's website includes the Digital Contact Team's direct telephone number alongside the main switchboard number (Finding 3 – Low).

Good Practice Noted

A number of areas of good practice were noted during our review as set out below, these have been reflected in the overall "low" risk classification of this report:

- The Council has a defined Customer Charter in place, which sets out a series of corporate standards for dealing with the Council's customers and forms the basis of the Council's induction, ongoing training and performance management for all staff in Customer Fulfilment.

- The Digital Contact Team, in conjunction with other Council departments, have developed detailed technical and specialist guidance which is used for addressing customer queries.

- Our sample testing found customer engagement to be in line with the Customer Charter. Our testing confirmed that agents avoided jargon and abbreviations that the customers would not understand; used precise and simple questions to quickly identify customer needs; used phrases to describe actions to prevent customers feeling ignored; and provided the answer first and added detail later if needed.

- For the 10 phone calls included in the sample, the agents verified who the customers were before giving any information, checked that the customers had fully understood what they had been told and, where applicable, identified appropriate contacts and transferred the customers or arranged to call them back if further information was required.

- Our sample testing also indicated that the Digital Contact Team are consistent and professional in their approach to communicating with customers. Our testing confirmed that agents were friendly, polite and helpful while remaining professional in all circumstances; responded to calls professionally and greeted customers appropriately; allowed the customers to fully outline the reason for contact without interruption; and ended the interaction with a short closing and thanked the customers.

- All social media posts included in the sample were found to have been responded to within the 4-hour target from the time they had been assigned to the Digital Contact Team from the Council's Communications Team.

- There is good overall awareness within the Digital Contact Team of the various Council areas, services and key contacts across the Council's departments.

- The Digital Contact Team has defined Key Performance Indicators and there are arrangements in place for collating and analysing team performance results. The Key Performance Indicators are reviewed and reported to Senior Management on a quarterly basis.

2. Background and Scope

Background

The Digital Contact Team support customers and help them self-serve. They primarily answer calls from the website number or direct dials to the switchboard. For the period from 1 April 2019 to 24 September 2019, the Digital Contact Team accepted 20,219 phone calls. The Team are also responsible for responding to web chats through the Council's website and for addressing social media posts assigned to them by the Council's Communications team. For the period from 1 April 2019 to 24 September the team accepted 10,787 chats.

The service has employed a number of innovative digital techniques to assist with the efficiency of the service. This includes Interactive Voice Response (IVR), allowing customers to receive automated information to a range of regular queries, web chat and social media. These latter options have meant the service faces new risks, as it is vital the responder is sufficiently articulate and uses consistent terminology in line with the Council's expectations. This results in a delicate balance between being personable and professional.

The service is consistently over achieving their targets, including abandonment rates, which are currently significantly better than target at 4%. A recent mystery shopper assessment resulted in a performance score of 92%, an improvement on the previous year's result of 88%, supporting the team's attitude towards continuous improvement. The Customer Charter outlines the Council's commitment to Aylesbury Vale residents, which includes providing them with effective communication and being knowledgeable about their services. This underpins all communication with customers and provides the targets against which the service is measured.

The purpose of this audit was to assess the control design and operating effectiveness with regards to the customer contact processes for the Digital Contact Team.

Scope

The scope covered the key risks set out in the Terms of Reference (see Appendix 2). Our testing included:

- Reviewing the Customer Charter to identify whether it is sufficiently detailed and fit for purpose

- Review of 20 web chats, 10 phone calls and 10 social media posts from the period 1 April 2019 to 24 September 2019 to determine whether staff are consistent and professional in their approach to communicating with customers, whether all customer contact is in line with the Customer Charter and whether staff promote self-serve and customers are taught how to obtain the information they require themselves

- Discussions with the team regarding how they work with other departments to ensure that any common problems are communicated and the most up to date information is made available to them

- Determining how data from customer engagement is used to enhance the availability of commonly required information, including whether it is logged and regularly reviewed to identify how public information can be enhanced.

This does not represent a comprehensive list of tests conducted.

3. Detailed findings and action plan

1. Absence of a structured approach for communicating with and reporting to other Council departments – Control design

Finding
The Digital Contact Team address queries that relate to Waste, Environmental Health, Housing, Housing Benefits, Parking, Rates and Recovery and Customer Fulfilment. The team are therefore required to work closely with other departments on a daily basis to ensure that customers are not provided with incorrect information. Whilst there is sufficient communication with other departments on an operational basis, there are no arrangements in place for reporting common problems and reasons for contacting the other Council departments, nor is there a procedure for systematically improving publicly available information.

There is a record of all phone calls, web chats and social media posts addressed by the team, however the data captured does not record the reason for contact, which means there is no mechanism in place for identifying, recording and analysing the reason for contact. Therefore there are no formal arrangements in place for reviewing the data to identify common themes, trends and problems.

The lack of data available for capturing the reason for contact and the absence of formal arrangements for feedback with other Council departments may hinder the Council's ability for channel shift from reliance on the Digital Contact Team to customer self-serve. |

Risks / Implications
Data is not used to enhance the availability of commonly required information. Opportunities to learn, improve customer experience and operational efficiencies are missed.

Finding rating	Action Plan	
Low	a) Management should put systems in place for identifying, recording and analysing the reasons for calls/chats, which should then be regularly reviewed to identify common themes, trends and problems.	*Kerry Porter, Team Manager*
		31 January 2020
	b) A standing item should be added to the agenda for team meetings so that the information collected is used to allow lessons learned to be identified and analysed.	
	c) A coordinated approach for communicating with the Council's departments on a routine basis should be established to ensure that public information is reviewed and, where necessary, updated to address the common problems and reasons for calls/chats.	

2. Insufficient monitoring and review of customer engagement – Control design

Finding
The Council has a Customer Charter in place which sets out a series of corporate standards for dealing with customers. The Charter defines the responsibilities for members of staff at all times, including in all written and verbal communication. One of the requirements of the Charter is that all members of staff should promote self-serve at all times, through the Council's website or 'My Account'.

Our review of 10 phone calls, 20 web chats and 20 social media posts found that in one instance the agent from the Digital Contact Team provided the answer to the customer's question without reminding the customer that they could have obtained the information on their own or explaining how to do this. The customer wanted to know when their bin would be collected and, whilst this is something that they could have found online, the agent did not explain this and simply provided the answer.

Management occasionally review a sample of phone calls and web chats and provide feedback to the relevant members of staff. However there is not a defined frequency or approach for doing this to ensure that customer engagement is reviewed against the requirements of the Council's Customer Charter in a structured and consistent way. |

Risks / Implications
Customers are engaged with in an inconsistent or unprofessional manner. Customers are not able to access information on their own.

The objectives of the Customer Charter are not achieved. |

Finding rating	Action Plan	
Low	a) Management should review and, where necessary, update the checklist used for completing their reviews, whether based on phone calls or web chats, to detail which aspects of the Customer Charter are being assessed. The frequency of reviews and sample size should then be agreed to confirm there is sufficient regular coverage to ensure issues will be identified promptly. *An example questionnaire based upon the Customer Charter has been included in Appendix 1.* b) The findings from the reviews should be collated to enable a review of potential training needs, either for the individual or the team as a whole.	*Kerry Porter, Team Manager* *31 January 2020*

3. Digital Contact Team contact details in Council website – Control design

Finding
The Council's public website includes the Digital Contact Team's direct telephone number in the 'Finding Us' page, alongside the main switchboard number. The main switchboard number provides a list of options so that customers can be connected to the relevant departments depending on their needs, including the Digital Contact Team. Having the direct number for the team readily available on the website may lead to more customers contacting the Digital Contact Team, even if they need to speak with a different department, if this is the most obvious communication route.

Risks / Implications
The Digital Contact Team receives an unnecessary volume of calls and hinders channel shift

Finding rating	Action Plan	
Low	Management should review the need for both numbers on the Council's website and should consider removing the direct number to further promote channel shift and the self-serve aim.	*Hazel Hutt*
		31 January 2020

Appendix 1. Quality review questionnaire

The following questions were used to test our sample of phone calls, web chats and social media posts against the Council's Customer Charter and best practice.

Management could use these questions to establish a quality review template for monitoring and supervision.

Does the agent/operator:	Y/N?	Comments or action required
For all verbal and written communication (phone calls, e-mails, web chats, social media posts)		
Verify who the customer is before giving away any information?		
Avoid jargon and abbreviations that the customer will not understand?		
Use precise and simple questions to quickly identify customer needs?		
Use phrases to describe actions to prevent the customer feeling ignored?		
Provide the answer first and add detail later if needed?		
Check that the customer fully understood what they have been told?		
Act in a friendly, polite and helpful manner while remaining professional at all times?		
End interaction with a short closing and thank the customer?		
Promote self-service?		
For all verbal communication only (phone calls)		
Respond to the call professionally and greet customer appropriately?		
Allow the customer to fully outline the reason for the call without interruption?		
Come across interested?		
Identify an appropriate contact and transfer the customer (where applicable)?		
Arrange to call a customer back if further information is needed?		
For all written communication only (e-mails, web chats, social media posts)		
Use short sentences (15-20 words)?		

Appendix 2. Finding ratings and basis of classification

Report classifications

The overall report classification is determined by allocating points to each of the individual findings included in the report.

Findings rating	Points
Critical	40 points per finding
High	10 points per finding
Medium	3 points per finding
Low	1 point per finding

Overall report classification		Points
●	Critical risk	40 points and over
●	High risk	16– 39 points
●	Medium risk	7– 15 points
●	Low risk	6 points or less

Individual finding ratings

Finding rating	Assessment rationale
Critical	A finding that could have a: • ***Critical*** impact on operational performance; or • ***Critical*** monetary or financial statement impact **[quantify if possible = materiality]**; or • ***Critical*** breach in laws and regulations that could result in material fines or consequences; or • ***Critical*** impact on the reputation or brand of the organisation which could threaten its future viability.
High	A finding that could have a: • ***Significant*** impact on operational performance; or • ***Significant*** monetary or financial statement impact **[quantify if possible]**; or • ***Significant*** breach in laws and regulations resulting in significant fines and consequences*; or* • ***Significant*** impact on the reputation or brand of the organisation.
Medium	A finding that could have a: • ***Moderate*** impact on operational performance; or • ***Moderate*** monetary or financial statement impact **[quantify if possible]**; or • ***Moderate*** breach in laws and regulations resulting in fines and consequences; or • ***Moderate*** impact on the reputation or brand of the organisation.
Low	A finding that could have a: • ***Minor*** impact on the organisation's operational performance; or • ***Minor*** monetary or financial statement impact **[quantify if possible]**; or • ***Minor*** breach in laws and regulations with limited consequences; or • ***Minor*** impact on the reputation of the organisation.
Advisory	A finding that does not have a risk impact but has been raised to highlight areas of inefficiencies or good practice.

Appendix 3.   Terms of reference

The key risks agreed in the Terms of Reference are set out below. Each finding in the report is linked to a key risk from the Terms of Reference.

Sub-process	Risks	Objectives
Customer contact	Customers are engaged with an inconsistent or unprofessional manner Incorrect information is provided to customers	• Guidance is in place for staff to follow on what is expected from them regarding how to engage with customers, including the language to be used in social media engagements and web chats • Staff are consistent and professional in their approach to communicating with customers • The Digital Contact Team work closely with other departments to ensure any common problems are communicated and the most up to date information is made available to the team • All customer contact is in line with the Customer Charter.
Customer self-serve	Customers are not able to access information on their own Data is not used to enhance the availability of commonly required information	• Customers are taught how to obtain the information they require themselves • Data relating to the reason for a call is logged and regularly reviewed to identify how public information can be enhanced. Systems are in place to support this.