



Report to Finance & Resources Select Committee

Date:	18 April 2024
Reference number:	n/a
Title:	Customer First Annual report, and CSC Performance Update.
Cabinet Member(s):	Cllr John Chilver (Cabinet Member, Resources) Cllr Tim Butcher (Deputy Cabinet Member, Resources)
Contact officer:	Lloyd Jeffries, Service Director (Business Operations)
Ward(s) affected:	None specific

Recommendations:

- To note the Customer Service Centre performance data and interventions for 2023/24.
- To note the high-level plans for using AI (Artificial Intelligence) to support customers when accessing Council services.
- To note the progress made by the Customer First team to embed a customer-centric culture at the Council, summarised by the latest Annual Report for 2023.

Reason for decision: n/a

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 2023/24 has been a pivotal period for the Customer Services team at Buckinghamshire Council, characterised by a return to stability and improved performance metrics. This report summarises the team's journey over the past 12 months, detailing the performance of Customer Services, the challenges faced, and

the ongoing initiatives to further enhance performance and the customer experience.

- 1.2 In the wake of unprecedented customer demand, the Customer Service Centre (CSC) has successfully reduced average call wait times from **10 minutes in the previous year to a more acceptable range of 3 to 5 minutes**. This achievement is a testament to the team's dedication and the effectiveness of the strategies implemented to improve service delivery.
- 1.3 The CSC has also maintained strong performance in other key metrics. Call answer rates improved from an average **85.2%** to a range between **91.1%** and **97.05%**. The high first call resolution rates, reaching up to **78.0%**, further underscored the CSC's commitment to resolving customer issues promptly and efficiently.
- 1.4 Innovation has been at the forefront of the CSC's approach to improving customer service. The Co-pilot trial has shown promising results in enhancing the quality and accuracy of service, contributing to a reduction in Average Handle Time (AHT).
- 1.5 Looking ahead, the report outlines plans to leverage AI in supporting customer access to Council services and celebrates the successful launch of a new CRM (Customer Relationship Management) platform. It also highlights the Customer First team's efforts to embed a customer-centric culture within the Council, as detailed in the latest Annual Report for 2023.
- 1.6 This report provides a snapshot of the Customer Services team's resilience and progress, reflecting their commitment to the 'Customer First' ethos and their dedication to ensuring that every interaction with Buckinghamshire Council is easy, helpful, fair, and honest.

2. Content of report

CSC performance update

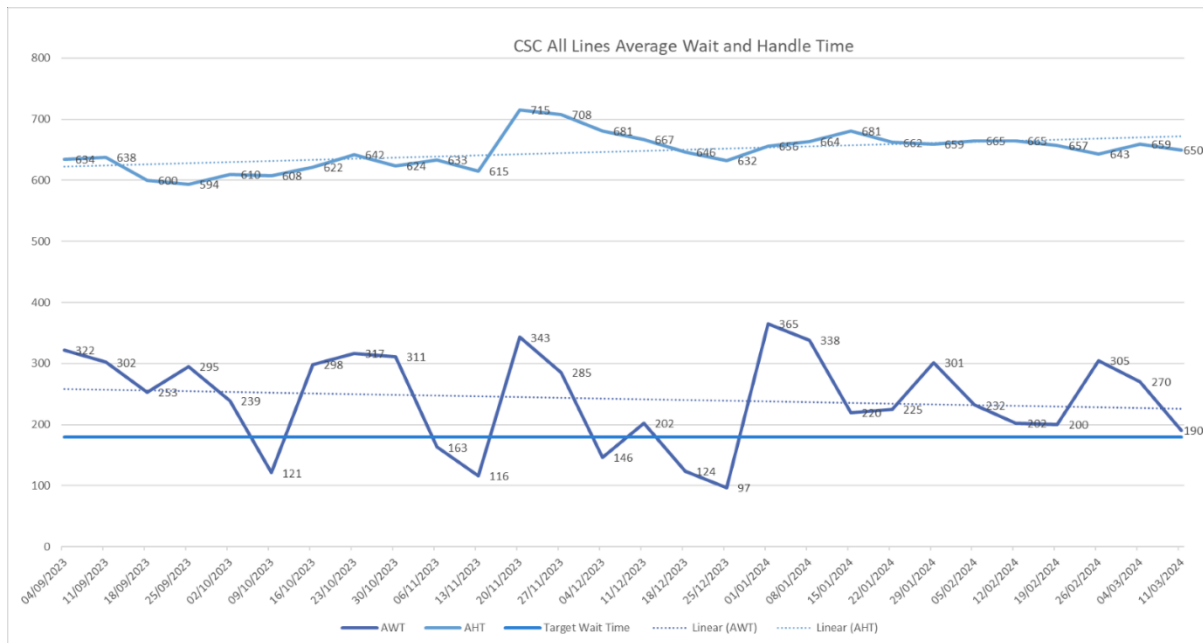
- 2.1 The Customer Service Centre (CSC) has shown significant improvement in performance over the last 12 months, particularly in terms of call wait times.
- 2.2 The performance indicators for the CSC across the last 12 months are detailed in the tables below:

Indicator	Target	22/23	Apr-23	May-23	Jun-23	Jul-23	Aug-23
Calls offered	-	440,428	32,646	34,507	35,222	33,681	31,924
Calls answered	-	375,255	27,983	31,598	33,259	32,404	30,719
% Calls answered	90%	85.20%	93.20%	91.57%	94.43%	96.21%	96.23%
% Calls abandoned	10%	12.81%	5.84%	7.27%	5.15%	3.58%	3.56%
Average call wait time	180 secs	594	226	311	312	230	208
First call resolution	51%	75.40%	75.20%	75.60%	76.40%	77.30%	77.40%

Indicator	Sep-23	Oct-23	Nov-23	Dec-23	Jan-24	Feb-24
Calls offered	32,472	31,032	28,941	23,061	32,900	28,749
Calls answered	30,054	29,537	27,711	22,383	29,972	26,854
% Calls answered	92.55%	95.18%	95.74%	97.05%	91.10%	93.41%
% Calls abandoned	5.69%	4.04%	3.46%	2.33%	8.18%	5.85%
Average call wait time	331	257	227	156	230	242
First call resolution	76.10%	77.80%	77.40%	78.00%	78.00%	78.00%

- 2.3 The CSC has worked diligently to reduce the average call wait time. The average call wait time in the 22/23 period was nearly 10 minutes, which significantly exceeds the current average wait time across 23/24 which is 5 minutes.
- 2.4 Despite wait times still being slightly outside of the target of 180 seconds (3 minutes), there has been a consistent effort to maintain wait times within the 3 to 5-minute range.
- 2.5 This comparison highlights the substantial improvements made over the last 12 months, demonstrating the CSC's commitment to enhancing customer service and reducing wait times for callers. The efforts to streamline processes and implement new technologies have contributed to a more efficient Customer Service Centre, resulting in a more responsive and customer-friendly service.
- 2.6 Notably, there have been no official customer complaints regarding wait times, indicating a positive reception of the efforts to improve this metric.
- 2.7 The CSC has consistently met its objectives concerning call answer rates, with a percentage of calls answered ranging from 91.1% to 97.05% over the past year. This is compared to an average 85.2% across the previous 12 months.

- 2.8 The percentage of calls abandoned has seen a decrease, with figures dropping as low as 2.33% in December 2023, showcasing the CSC's commitment to addressing customer calls promptly.
- 2.9 First call resolution rates have remained high, with the CSC achieving rates of up to **78.00%**, reflecting the CSCs efficiency in resolving customer issues on the initial contact.
- 2.10 The CSC's performance indicators highlight a robust recovery from the 22/23 levels, with significant strides made in enhancing customer service efficiency. The dedication to improving call handling and resolution processes has resulted in a more streamlined and customer-friendly experience.
- 2.11 Customer Services has consistently navigated through a myriad of challenges to uphold performance standards. The team has faced pressures such as staff turnover and the subsequent need for retraining, which have been significant.
- 2.12 The **migration to the new CRM platform, Abavus**, has been another significant undertaking. The change process has been managed effectively to minimise disruption, although some impact on performance was inevitable as staff adapted to the new system. The transition has been well-handled, with staff retraining and learning new processes to ensure continuity of service.
- 2.13 Managing back-office demand has been a significant challenge, particularly in relation to the monthly cycle of Council Tax recovery – the Council issued over **100,000 reminders and final notices** as well as **over 20,000 summonses** over the course of 2023/24. This process generates a substantial volume of customer inquiries directed at the Customer Services team. There is careful planning to ensure the availability of resources to handle the surge in customer contacts following their receipt of a call to action. The team has been focused on aligning resources to effectively manage these spikes and maintain service levels as far as possible.
- 2.14 The team's proactive approach to managing challenges and disruptions has been crucial in maintaining service delivery and customer satisfaction. Despite these challenges, wait times have been relatively stable, as shown in the graph below. This period of relative stability is the result of the collective efforts of Customer Services and the back-office services to effectively manage demand.



2.15 We continue to use proactive measures for busy periods e.g. as we dispatch letters to residents eligible for council tax discounts, and we anticipate a rise in customer contact. To manage this, we've implemented various measures, including informative phone messages and an annual leave embargo period, especially as we approach the council tax annual billing cycle.

2.16 We are also exploring other ways to enhance our performance:

- We have continued with the Microsoft Co-Pilot trial to support the Contact Centre in several ways. The main benefit is that we can quickly summarise customer calls to be entered into emails or case management systems, either line of business systems or our CRM. This can save time and improve the accuracy of information entered into these systems. Additionally, Co-Pilot can support quality monitoring of calls and complaints and we have started to look at how we use Co-Pilot to analyse customer sentiment and identify emerging trends across calls.
- We have now issued new Operating Level Agreements with key services areas to formalise the relationship between Customer Services and the back office. To emphasise the importance of collaborative working and customer-centric culture at all points of the customer journey.

Website Accessibility

- 2.17 As a local authority, we are committed to providing a website that is accessible to everyone, regardless of their abilities or needs. We believe that having an accessible website is not only a legal obligation, but also a moral duty and a social benefit.
- 2.18 By making our website accessible, we are complying with the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018, which require public sector organisations to make their websites and apps accessible to people with disabilities. More importantly, we are ensuring that all our residents and stakeholders can access and use our website effectively, without facing barriers or discrimination. Having an accessible website also helps us to improve our customer service, enhance our reputation, and reach a wider audience.
- 2.19 Our website's accessibility scores are based on the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA standards, which are the international benchmark for web accessibility. These standards measure how easy it is for people with different disabilities to access and understand web content. The higher the score, the more accessible the website is.
- 2.20 Our website has a high overall score of **92.8 out of 100**, which means that it is mostly accessible. It also meets the minimum requirement of level A rating, with a score of **97.7 out of 100**, which means that it provides basic access to the web content. Moreover, it meets most of the level AA rating criteria, with a score of **94.7 out of 100**, which means that it provides enhanced access to the web content.
- 2.21 However, we are aware that our website has some technical issues that affect its accessibility, especially for users of assistive technology, such as screen readers. These issues are related to headings and element IDs.
- 2.22 Headings are used to organise and label the web content, making it easier for users to navigate and understand the information. Element IDs are used to identify and link different parts of the web content, such as navigation menus, forms, and buttons. Some of our web pages have headings that are skipped or nested incorrectly, which can confuse users of assistive technology. Some of our web pages also have element IDs that are not unique, which can make it difficult for users to distinguish between different elements.
- 2.23 These issues are technical in nature and do not affect the content or functionality of the website. However, we are working hard to fix them and will update our accessibility statement accordingly when this is done. We are collaborating with our hosting provider, Torchbox, who is responsible for the technical aspects of the website and when they are implemented, will update our accessibility statement accordingly.
- 2.24 We have also just changed our accessibility target upwards from 80% to 90% for all forthcoming reporting periods from April 2024.
- 2.25 Further information can be found on our website in our accessibility statements [here](#)

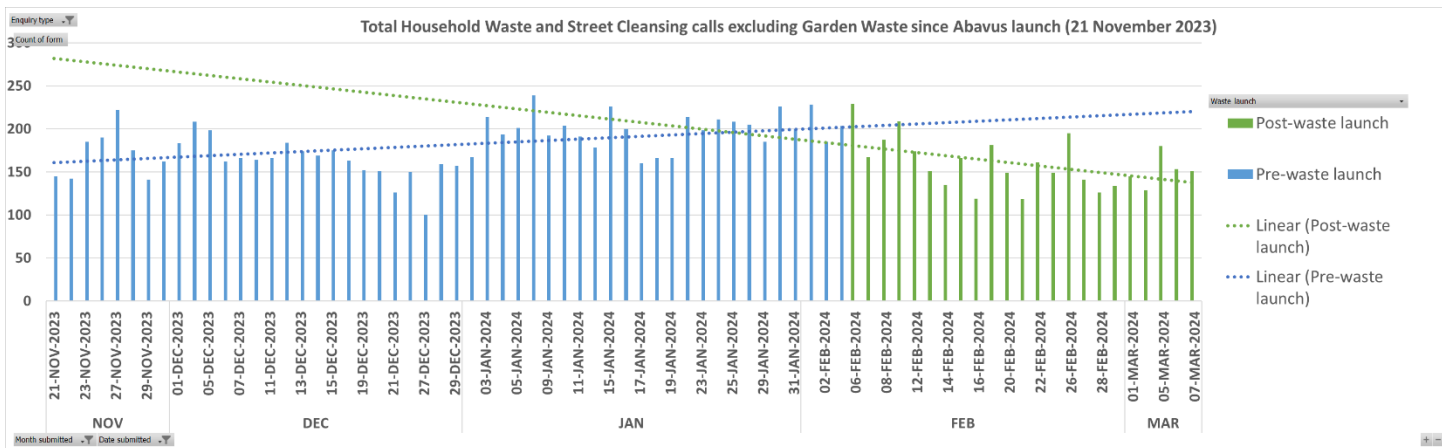
CRM Implementation Update

- 2.26 The ongoing Customer Relationship Management (CRM) programme is designed to migrate our interactive web forms and processes from our legacy platforms to a single platform, provided by digital transformation company Abavus.
- 2.27 Key implementation activity to date includes:
- Most customer interactions through **contact us** forms (excepting some education enquiries) **October 2023**
 - Customer services – who are fully using Abavus for recording customer interactions. **November 2023**
 - The garden waste subscription service go live for residents in Aylesbury Vale area (all non-Veolia residents), has now surpassed **20,000** sign ups since launch **December 2023**.
 - **Waste and Recycling:** colleagues in both the North and South now use Abavus for resident interactions. This means the Southern team no longer use the GOSS Interactive platform for any communications. **February 2023**
 - The Northern team have begun the process of winding down the use of Salesforce
 - **Fix My Street** interactions are now also **integrated into Abavus**, giving more information to both customer services and the waste team as well as the communications that are sent to customers. **February 2023**
- 2.28 The new platform and processes have been met with positive reception, particularly by the Waste teams who have embraced the system with enthusiasm. The platform's ability to provide clear visibility of performance metrics, which were previously challenging to surface, has been a significant benefit.
- 2.29 In the first month following its implementation, the Waste teams efficiently processed 2,048 service requests through Abavus, not including garden waste payments.
- 2.30 An impressive 98.5% of these requests were either completed or are within the 10-working day service level agreement, demonstrating the team's commitment to timely and efficient customer service.
- 2.31 Similarly, requests received via Fix My Street have shown remarkable performance, with 1,649 requests received and 99.4% of them either actioned or within the 10-working day service level agreement.

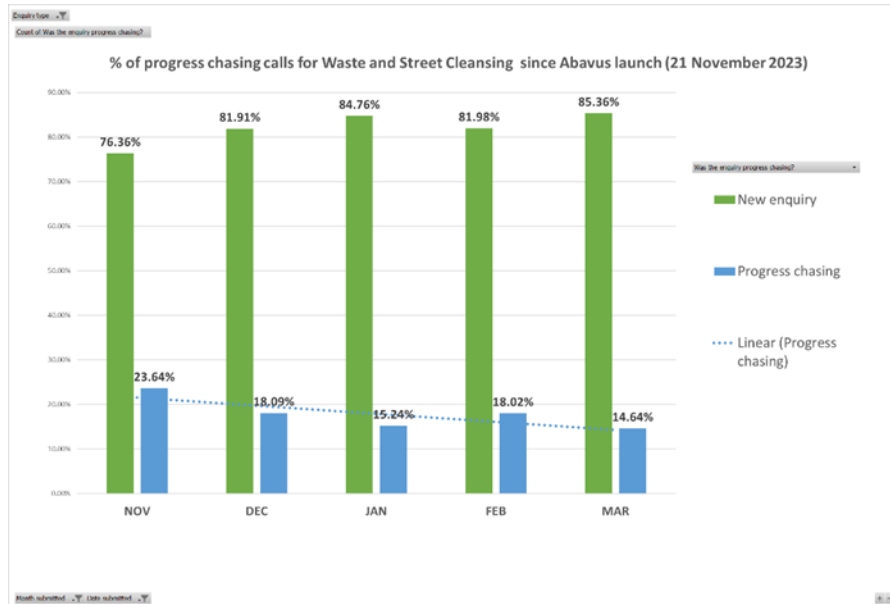
An example of a typical fly-tipping report in FixMyStreet before the integration	An example of a typical fly-tipping report in FixMyStreet post the integration
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<p>UPDATES</p> <p>Reports of fly-tipping on public land are forwarded to the waste collection team for removal, and all reports are copied to the investigation team to review.</p> <p>Follow us on Twitter @BucksFlyTipping</p> <p><i>Posted by Buckinghamshire Council at 08:43, Sunday 28 January 2024</i></p> <p>Please be aware that reports are automatically closed after 21 days to avoid duplication. Should you find for any reason that your report has not been actioned within this period; please resubmit your request and highlight the exact issue so that we can look further into the matter. We will ensure that this is dealt with as a priority.</p> <p><i>State changed to: Closed</i></p> <p><i>Posted by Buckinghamshire Council at 01:12, Monday 19 February 2024</i></p>	<p>UPDATES</p> <p>Reports of fly-tipping on public land are forwarded to the waste collection team for removal, and all reports are copied to the investigation team to review.</p> <p>Follow us on Twitter @BucksFlyTipping</p> <p><i>Posted by Buckinghamshire Council at 14:30, Tuesday 27 February 2024</i></p> <p><i>State changed to: Investigating</i></p> <p><i>Updated by Buckinghamshire Council at 14:40, Tuesday 27 February 2024</i></p> <p><i>State changed to: Action scheduled</i></p> <p><i>Updated by Buckinghamshire Council at 16:15, Tuesday 27 February 2024</i></p>
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- 2.32 This data not only highlights the successful adoption of the new tool by the Waste teams but also showcases the positive impact on customer response times, ensuring that residents receive prompt and effective service resolution.
- 2.33 Excluding garden waste sign ups, we have seen the average number of calls for waste and street cleansing drop by 12.5% since launch, compared to the preceding 2 months, highlighting how the improvements to web-content, webforms and back-office processes can reduce phone contact.



- 2.34 We are also witnessing a downward trend in the % of these calls which are progress chasing, suggesting that performance and communications to customers is improving.



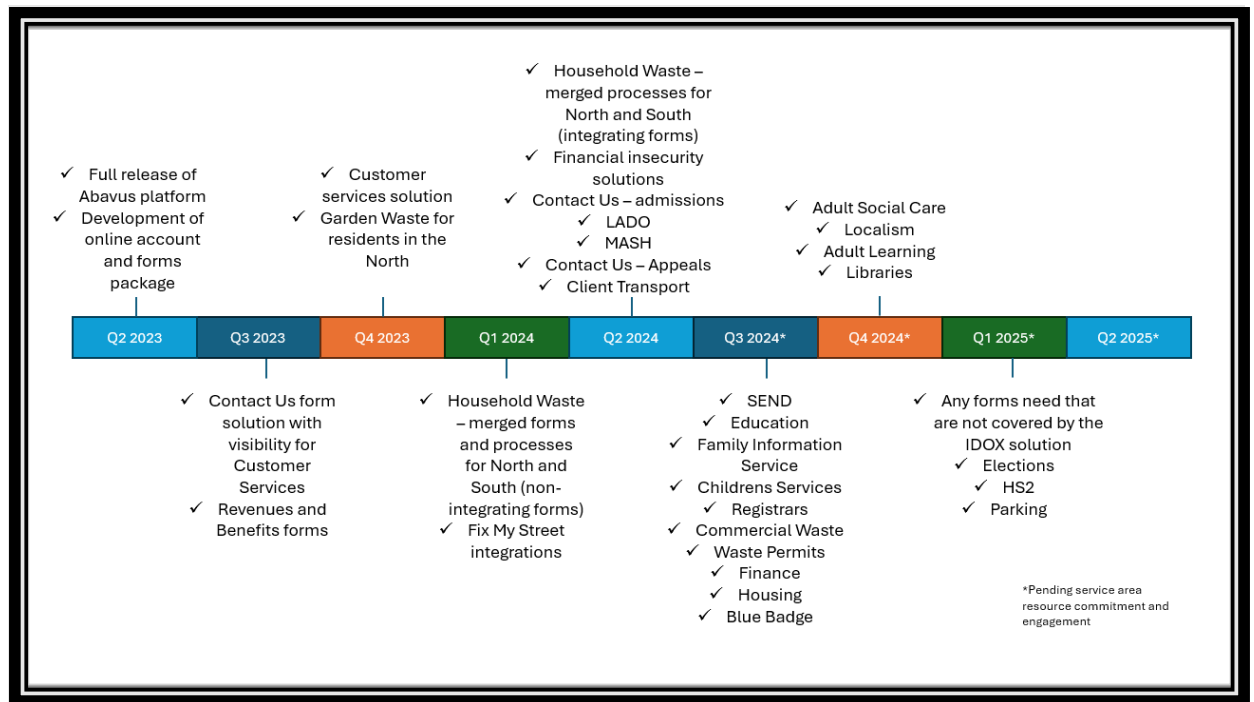
2.35 The CRM development roadmap for the upcoming months is summarised as follows:

Date	Task
March	A completion of the migration for waste processes – the forms that integrate with little to no officer intervention. This includes missed bins, ordering containers, garden waste for the South, and bulky collections of unwanted household items.
April	Offboard GOSS Interactive as a supplier.
April	Transition the final Salesforce processes to be moved to Abavus. The rest are all part of the ONE Uniform project.
April	Design, develop and deliver the webform and back-office processes for the Financial Insecurity project, replacing the previous Helping Hands form hosted on ServiceNow.
April-June	Continue the process of migrating Granicus processes onto Abavus (Five projects are already in train): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact Us form for Schools Admissions. • Contact Us form for Client Transport. • Contact Us form for Appeals. • The Multi-Agency-Safeguarding-Hub (MASH) – this is nearing completion. • The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) – this is nearing completion.

2.36 The listed five projects above are set to complete by June 2024.

2.37 The next wave of processes to migrate will soon be scoped and allocated to the project team, with the migration from Granicus due to be completed by the end of the Granicus contract in June 2025.

2.38 The roadmap for migrating services from the legacy Granicus platform to Abavus is shown below:



2.39 We have already identified some future opportunities to onboard additional services and processes onto the CRM platform. Some potential areas for consideration include replacing the ‘Find My Child A School Place’ digital service, integrating the Housing system Locata, implementing an end-to-end Blue Badge service, and even replacing FixMyStreet as a place-based reporting tool.

Using AI in Customer Services

2.40 As part of our commitment to enhancing customer service, Customer services has continued to explore opportunities where Artificial Intelligence can be deployed to support residents to access support and advice.

2.41 Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming the way we interact with our customers and deliver services. We are exploring how AI can assist our customer service agents, by capturing and summarising customer conversations automatically. This will help them to quickly and easily update our various systems, reducing errors and saving time.

- 2.42 By using AI to enhance our customer service, we aim to improve customer satisfaction, efficiency and quality. But please be assured that any decisions will always be taken by a human – not AI.
- 2.43 We have already successfully deployed a rules-based chatbot that handles over 2000 queries per week, providing quick and accurate answers to common questions and requests. The current solution is not using AI. Instead, it uses pre-defined rules and presents customers with set of options or buttons to choose from.
- 2.44 Conversational AI goes beyond rule-based chatbots. They leverage advanced technologies like natural language processing and machine learning to create more human-like interactions.
- 2.45 We are actively looking at ways to expand the use of AI on our website and phone services to support customers across a wider range of services. For example, we're planning to trial telephony AI to assist customers who call us, by finding information, directing them to the correct team, or helping them complete an action. This frees up our customer service agents to focus on supporting vulnerable customers, those with more complex enquiries and those who prefer not to use digital services.

Customer First Annual Report 2023

- 2.46 Within the Corporate Plan the Council clearly sets out its customer centric ambition which we describe as Customer First. The Customer First Strategy was agreed by Cabinet in September 2021, and the Customer First service standards are published on our website as three promises.
- 2.47 The Customer First Board has been in operation since November 2021 and has excellent engagement from attendees across the Council and Customer First Champions. The Board tracks the Customer First activities which are all aligned to our Customer First promises.
- 2.48 The Customer First Board meets monthly and is chaired by the Corporate Director of Resources, Sarah Murphy Brookman, and the Corporate Director for Communities, Richard Barker. All directorates are represented on the board through the participation of Service Directors.
- 2.49 The Board has now produced the second 'Annual Report' to share the progress made during 2023 and the priorities for the next 12 months. This was published on the Buckinghamshire Council website in February 2024, following approval by the Customer First Board and CMT.
- 2.50 The Customer First Annual Report 2023 outlines the progress and initiatives undertaken by the council to prioritise a customer-first culture. The report emphasises

the importance of delivering excellent customer service and details the various strategies implemented to achieve this goal.

Vision and Achievements

- 2.51 The vision is to embed a customer-first culture across the organisation, ensuring every employee values and exemplifies this principle. The goals are to make interactions easy, helpful, fair, and honest, with a strong emphasis on security and GDPR compliance.
- 2.52 Efforts have been made to cater to the diverse communication needs of Buckinghamshire's residents, including enhancing digital proficiency, providing telephone support, and we are exploring the use of bookable meetings at Council Access Points.
- 2.53 Achievements across 2023 include:
- Launched **Year of Conversation** campaign to highlight the importance of good conversation in achieving faster outcomes and improving resolutions.
 - Introduced **mandatory Customer First training** for new staff and ongoing development for existing staff. The training is focused on providing a high-quality customer experience and includes handling complex conversations.
 - Implemented a **Digital Postroom** for efficient management of hard copy correspondence.
 - Rebuilt the **online contact us form** to guide customers through digital processes and contact the right teams if they are unable to self-serve online.
 - Deployed a **chatbot service** on the website to handle common queries and reduce telephone contact
 - Rolled out a new **document translation service** to assist customers whose first language is not English.
 - Expanded the use of **8x8 contact centre style telephony** to high volume, customer facing teams across the Council
 - Rolled out **Happy or Not digital surveys** across key services lines to gather customer feedback and identify areas for improvement.
- 2.54 The roadmap for the Customer First Programme includes several key developments aimed at enhancing customer service and experience:
- **Expansion of AI Use** - The council plans to further integrate AI technology into its website and phone services. This will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of customer service, allowing for quicker and more accurate

responses to customer inquiries. The use of AI will also help in managing a higher volume of interactions without compromising the quality of service.

- **Bookable Face-to-Face Appointments:** Recognising the need for personalised support, we are looking to introduce a service for vulnerable customers or those with complex service needs to book face-to-face appointments. This initiative aims to provide tailored support and ensure that all customers have access to the help they need, in a manner that is most convenient for them.
- **Continued CRM Implementation:** The rollout of a new comprehensive Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system will continue throughout 2024. This system is designed to manage customer interactions across the council effectively, providing a common customer journey across all service lines. The CRM will enable the council to track interactions, understand customer needs better, and deliver more personalised service.

2.55 These developments are part of the Council's commitment to improving customer satisfaction, efficiency, and service quality. The roadmap reflects an ambitious plan to leverage technology and innovative service delivery methods to truly put customers at the centre of everything that we do.

2.56 The full Annual Report 2023 has been shared alongside this report.

3 Other options considered

3.1 Not applicable

4 Legal and financial implications

4.1 Not applicable

5 Corporate implications

5.1 Not applicable

6 Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

6.1 Not applicable



7 Communication, engagement & further consultation

7.1 Not applicable

8 Next steps and review

W	Action
April	Continue exploring the use of AI tools, such as Microsoft Co-Pilot, to improve customer service performance and experience.
April	Prototype Microsoft Co-Pilot bot for internal staff
April	Integrating forms for Waste go-live on CRM
April-June	Phase 2 CRM Implementation
May	AI Business Case for Customer Services
Ongoing	Collaborate with Microsoft to develop a more effective and innovative approach to AI implementation.
Ongoing	Monitor the progress of key projects, such as the extension of 8x8, Translate, Happy or Not feedback, Visitor Management
Ongoing	Rolling out the Abavus case management system to service areas

9 Background papers

9.1 Not applicable

10 Your questions and views (for key decisions)

If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by telephone] or email [