

Housing scrutiny panel

Review of LBC customer service process

Author: Tenant Participation Team

Contact: TPluton@luton.gov.uk

Version: 1.0 (published)

Last updated: 11 June 2025

Contents

1.Date of review and staff involved	2
2.Executive summary.....	2
3.Recommendations	2
4.Background	3
5.The review	3
6.Methodology	4
7.Positive findings	4
8.Areas for improvement.....	4
9.Recommendations	5
10. Summary.....	6
11.Next steps	6

1. Date of review and staff involved

Date of review Customer Service – 23 August 2022

Date report to be presented to Service Director housing and customer service operations and delivery manager: Atika Choudhury - service director Housing and Sarah Markham – head of housing operations.

Review Lead: Steve Berresford

Report author: written and agreed by all Scrutiny Panel members

Scrutiny members directly involved in the review:

Steve Berresford (Chair)

Barry Firmin

Vanessa Moffat

Jaqueline Stephens

Christine Williams

Staff involved in the review:

Shakira Uddin – Housing income manager

Sarah Markham - Head of housing operations

Maureen Herdman – Tenant participation manager

Ben Attard - Tenant participation officer

Maurice Franks – Tenant participation officer

2. Executive summary

In August 2022 the Housing Scrutiny Panel (HSP) discussed and agreed to review the Town Hall's Customer Services (CS) provision to council tenants with housing queries/issues.

The decision was taken based on a desktop review of Customer Services – Housing Operations Calls Analysis – Q2, and anecdotal information from Key Customers who expressed dissatisfaction with call waiting times. Key customers told the Panel they often abandoned calls and that promised call backs often didn't happen.

The Panel agreed that the purpose of the review was to investigate tenant dissatisfaction with the service and drill down into the high numbers of telephone calls abandoned. The objective was to advise Customer Services on the effectiveness of customer services to the housing operations and provide recommendations on how to improve.

3. Recommendations

1. That management note and agree the report.
2. That management agree and support an improvement plan to implement recommendations.
3. That managers' report on progress against the improvement plan to the Housing Scrutiny Panel in six months' time.

4. Background

A project scoping meeting was held on 23 August 2022 between Shakira Uddin and the Housing Scrutiny Panel (HSP) to discuss the processes and procedures utilised by the Contact Centre when they receive, by telephone, housing operations enquiries

5. The review

At the scoping meeting the Panel asked to see the Service Level Agreement between housing and customer services. It was noted that this agreement was anecdotal and not in writing.

Action: Recommend this is reviewed

A report was presented by Shakira for quarter two (July-September 2022/23) showing the number of calls received and call answering times and calls abandoned.

HSP discussed the report and were shocked by the poor response rate with over 30% of calls going unanswered. Shakira explained the challenges for the Contact Centre and these were noted.

Housing Operations Calls – July-September 2022

Total Calls Received into CS:

July – 2083

August – 1868

September – 1837

Total Calls Answered by CS:

July – 1434

August – 1260

September – 1265

% Calls Answered:

July – 68.84%

August – 67.45%

September - 68.86%

Calls Answered by CSA:

July – 698

August – 602

September – 695

Calls Answered by telephony self-service:

July – 736

August – 658

September – 570

The challenges for customer services were discussed and agreed as:

- Staffing levels – the centre is permanently understaffed.
- Recruitment and retention of staff.
- The effectiveness of the website – customers cannot carry out many day-to-day tasks online (e.g. pay rent, request a form).
- Website links failing, requiring more customer calls to carry out tasks such as setting up a new direct debit.
- Repairs calls coming through to customer services and operatives redirecting these to BTS.
- Unable to direct calls to housing officers as their phones are always busy (tenants have their direct numbers).
- Ineffective Customer Relationship Management (CRM) means link the service cannot monitor:
 - How many customers get called back after they leave a message
 - Cannot monitor or record how many calls are resolved by staff
 - Cannot monitor how many calls are rectified or not by back-office staff
 - What happens after customers are directed to the website?

6. Methodology

The panel used the following methods to carry out the research for this service review which included:

Document review

- Housing Operations Call Analysis Q2
- Discussion with Customer Service Operations Manager
- Housing Performance Report
- Complaints report.

Other methods of investigation

- Discussions with tenants who called the Contact Centre in past three months.

7. Positive findings

It was noted that Customer Service staff are committed, courteous and professional when speaking with the public. This is despite speaking sometimes having to deal with difficult customers. The Contact Centre mostly receives timely updates from housing teams on policy and procedure updated. This ensures the service has up to date information.

8. Areas for improvement

Improve call pick up time – It was noted that BTS's call centre answers call faster and monitors call resolution via the housing database.

Develop a means to track and monitor call resolution – Could BTS's call centre model be utilised for this?

Staffing – The Panel noted that the service is permanently understaffed leaving them unable to respond in a timely way to the number of calls received.

In discussions with tenants, it was often mentioned that a caller can be waiting for 30 minutes or longer for someone in the Contact Centre to answer the phone. Staff shortages was the common issue raised by Customer Service for long waiting times, abandoned calls and not returning calls.

IT System – Calls to the Contact Centre are high. Call analysis reveals that in September 1837 calls were received regarding housing operations. Of those 1265 (68%) were answered by the Contact Centre. Similar data was recorded for July and August. An effective CRM service linked to the housing database could reduce number of calls.

Improve the website – improving the website offer could reduce calls, as customers 'self service'.

Training – Customer Service did not provide information on their training programme. A training checklist would help identify any training requirements for new Contact Centre staff. This would also be helpful to monitor training requirements when housing process are modified. The checklist would be part of staff supervision. The checklist can be coordinated with Housing Managers to ensure all relevant task are included.

9. Recommendations

Staffing

Option 1: Improve R would be recruitment

Set up an internal review of the recruitment processes to try and fill vacant posts. A joint meeting with new recruits after they have been in post for 3 months may help confirm if there are any issues with induction of staff and whether this is a factor in retention of staff.

Option 2: Utilise BTS as the Call Centre for Housing Operations - Have all Housing calls go to the BTS call centre. The BTS call centre is currently efficiently and effectively answering calls within 5 minutes. A large proportion of the housing calls going to the Contact Centre are regarding repairs. These callers are often informed or transferred by Contact Centre to BTS call centre.

Housing Officer mobile numbers: change these and make them private numbers? This would mean all necessary calls to go through BTS or Customer Services – this would make monitoring easier and more effective.

A one stop shop would require some retraining BTS call handlers and slightly increasing BTS call centre manning. This possibly can be done without cost by moving one or two staff from Contact Centre to BTS call centre.

Option 3: Do nothing. Continue with the current recruitment efforts in anticipation of the job market changing.

CRM development and website updates

Developing the IT systems: The possibilities the new upcoming Housing I.T. system can offer should be explored. This could assist callers by gathering information on repairs timelines and other details. Many applications (used by the business world) actively encourage 'self-serve' minimising the need to telephone customer service.

Option 4: Ensure Customer Service provides input in the development of the system. Explore linking the system to the Contact Centre system.

Option 5: Design the I.T. system to be user friendly in allowing residents online services. This would reduce number of calls to Contact Centre. Use similar I.T. systems other companies developed for allowing the customers to track status of their request/scheduled repair, use 'frequently asked questions', and online 'chats' with housing and/or contact centre.

Service Level Agreement: The current Service Level Agreement should be reviewed to determine if it requires updating. Target date: TBC.

10. Summary

The review did not meet the objective of drilling down into the high numbers of abandoned telephone calls. Customer Service had no data showing amount or types of abandoned calls which were later answered. There was not a process regarding abandoned calls.

It was not established how many residents asking for a return call were actually contacted. The Housing Ombudsman reports mentioned this as a concern by residents during national surveys.

It's doubtful a further light touch review by Scrutiny Panel would identify any further meaningful information to enhance the customer journey under the current conditions.

An extensive review could take place after the options are considered and the new I.T. system is in place.

11. Next steps

Review the situation in 6 months' time.