

APPENDIX E

Committee: Operational Resilience Task and Finish Group **Date:** Tuesday 12 March 2024
Title: Public Engagement
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Summary

1. This report describes the impact on the council of the disruption to the waste and recycling service through the increased number of calls to the Customer Service Centre, complaints and comments on social media. It also sets out common types of enquiries and complaints and the council's approach to keeping residents informed.

Recommendations

2. None

Financial Implications

3. None

Background Papers

4. None

Impact

- 5.

Communication/Consultation	This report explains the steps the council took to keep the public informed during the period of disruption to waste and recycling services
Community Safety	None
Equalities	None
Health and Safety	None
Human Rights/Legal Implications	None

Sustainability	None
Ward-specific impacts	None
Workforce/Workplace	The impact on some areas of the workforce is touched on in this report.

Situation

6. As the waste and recycling service is the most visible front-facing service the council offers, the disruption inevitably caused a large increase in enquiries and complaints from residents. Primarily these contacts came through the Customer Service Centre, although a small number of complaints were sent directly to the Chief Executive and/or the Leader and the Portfolio Holder. In addition there were thousands of comments via social media which are covered elsewhere in this report.
7. This report provides information on the number of such customer contacts during the peak period of disruption in January and February and also explains the steps the council took to keep residents informed, as much as possible, about what was happening on a day-by-day basis.
8. Inevitably there are lessons to be learned for senior management, Customer Services and the Communications and Website teams, as is always the case when an unexpected widespread issue such as this arises, and this will be incorporated into a subsequent report to the Task and Finish Group.
9. The report breaks the statistics down into three categories – contact directly to Customer Services, complaints sent to the aforementioned senior officer and councillors, and lastly some information about how the council used communication channels to inform and update residents and also online activity during the period.

Customer Services

10. The Customer Service Centre is the primary point of contact for residents wanting to receive services or ask questions of the council. It deals with more than half of all phone calls received across the entire authority; it has responsibility for two of the most high traffic email accounts – uconnect@uttlesford.gov.uk and wasteaware@uttlesford.gov.uk – and the team also runs the council's LiveChat instant messaging service which can be accessed via the website.
11. Complaints received via the council's online website form go into the uconnect inbox and are either dealt with in Customer Services or, where this is not possible due to the need for specialist officer intervention, are forwarded on to the relevant department. These forms are included in the email data presented in this report – ultimately it doesn't matter how the complaint is received; from a customer's point of view all that matters is that their complaint is dealt with.

12. Inevitably, the widespread disruption caused a massive rise in the number of enquiries received by Customer Services. The table at Appendix A shows week by week how many calls, emails and LiveChats were dealt with, compared to the same time period the year before.
13. While reporting on phone calls and LiveChats is done through the council's phone system, monitoring of emails is a manual process whereby supervisors have had to count every email. Although daily stats compiled by Customer Services list the total number of emails received and dealt with, this reporting does not provide a service-by-service breakdown. Should members require a week-by-week breakdown of emails, this can be provided although it will be many hours' work for an already hard-pressed service.
14. The most common enquiries and trends during the period as reported by the Customer Services team are as follows:
- The first calls that came through to Customer Services were requesting clarification on communications sent out via parish councils – initially the team was unable to provide further information as to how the council was resolving the issue beyond what had been explained to parish councils. Customer Service Advisors did reassure residents the council was taking the issue very seriously and would let residents know the plan once it was agreed, and in the meantime to leave their bins out.
 - There were enquiries as to whether Council Tax would be reduced due to non-collection. Once a statement on this was released, these calls reduced in number. Additionally it gave Customer Service Advisors the information they required should a resident not have seen that statement.
 - Residents wanted to know how the council let this happen.
 - As the disruption progressed, the majority of calls became those just asking when their bins would be cleared, even if wasn't that day.
 - Where the council said, in good faith, a particular area would be cleared and then this ended up not being the case due to the volume of waste that needed to be collected or mechanical issues with the fleet, this then produced further calls and further frustration.
 - The general message to "leave your bins out we will get to you as soon as we can" was not well-received in some quarters.
 - Residents felt that being in local government should mean the council should be able to get a licence quicker and phoned the council to say that.
 - Some Parish Councils called for further information.
 - Towards the end of the period of disruption as services were returning to normal the number of calls relating to the garden waste service started catching up with, and then overtaking, the calls about general domestic collections.

15. Customer Services' Supervisor and Team Leaders liaised with Environmental Services and the Website and Communications Teams to ensure they were able to provide the best possible information to residents. Ultimately, the Customer Services team wanted residents to feel reassured and even though an error had been made their communication was important to the council and staff were doing their best to rectify the issue.
16. While a level of annoyance and frustration is completely understandable, unfortunately staff were at times subjected to unreasonably aggressive and rude customers. In such circumstances, staff let the caller vent their frustrations, then reiterated what the council could, and was doing, and apologised.
17. The most abusive customers were escalated to the Team Leaders and Supervisors.
18. This has been an extremely difficult period for Customer Services. The sheer volume of customer contacts has been difficult to keep up with and that, combined with the level of aggression from a minority, has had a substantial impact on the team. The only way the team has been able to cope with the workload is by working extra hours. The additional cost of this will be included in the report being prepared by the Section 151 Officer which will be presented to Council.

Complaints

19. A small number of residents complained directly to the Chief Executive and/or the Leader. In addition, some complaints were escalated either by Customer Services or the Environmental Services team where initial responses were not accepted by the complainant.
20. The table at Appendix B sets out these complaints as coordinated by the Executive Support Team. They were relatively small in number, with the majority being general complaints about the disruption to service. A small number of emails requested refunds of Council Tax and an even smaller number were complaints specifically about either trade waste or garden waste collections. One complaint was received about a problem with an assisted collection.
21. Residents also complained to their ward councillors but numbers for these are not held centrally and in any case many of these also complained directly through Customer Services or senior staff and/or members.

Communication approach

22. As it did with enquiries from residents, the disruption to the waste and recycling service generated a high volume of enquiries from local, regional and trade media over a number of weeks.
23. This peaked in the days after it became apparent the council's licence had been revoked. As this was an operational rather than political issue, the Chief Executive conducted TV interviews with BBC and ITV on 26 January. The

Leader took part in a follow-up interview with the BBC on 30 January and the Portfolio Holder also spoke to the local press. Multiple statements and updates were provided on request to regional and local outlets as well as to journalists working for trade or national organisations. The coverage was extensive in the local press with online and paper articles running over several weeks.

24. Alongside traditional media, the council used its social media channels heavily to cascade information and service updates. It was important the information was coordinated across services and channels and therefore the council adopted a consistent process early, which was used throughout the period of disruption:

- An update was provided at the end of most days, detailing the work that had been completed and the plan for the following day.
- These updates were published at around the same time, in the early evening, to ensure consistency for residents.
- Each message was uploaded to a dedicated space on the council's website, linked from the homepage
- It was emailed out, almost always by the Chief Executive to all councillors and all parish councils
- It was posted on Facebook and Instagram
- The recorded message that greets people phoning the Customer Service Centre on 01799 510510 was changed every time with the latest information
- The statement was an important source of information to allow Customer Service staff to help customers phoning, emailing and using LiveChat. Internally a Microsoft Teams group was established for Customer Service Team Leaders, Communications, Website and Environmental Services staff to quickly exchange information and provide updates during each working day
- Every statement included an apology for the disruption

25. The main difficulty encountered by the Communications Team in compiling the daily statement was the reliability of information about the following day's plan. Every daily statement released was accurate at the time of publishing; however because of issues on the ground including the sheer volume of waste being collected, vehicle breakdowns and the unfamiliarity of parts of the district of crews provided by other organisations, it sometimes proved to be the case that despite best efforts the day's work could not be completed. This then led to further complaints to the Customer Services team and on social media.

26. To ensure as much clarity as possible in the messaging (and to avoid people leaving comments about their bins on unrelated posts) the decision was taken to suspend social media posts related to other service areas.

27. A decision was taken early that the council would not reply to comments on bin-related social media posts. The reasons for this were:

- The volume of correspondence – collectively the 20 related social media posts reached hundreds of thousands of users and generated almost 3,000 comments. This was an unprecedented amount and over an extended period, and it was simply not possible to reply to all.
- In many circumstances, the council was simply unable to provide users with the information being requested, such as the exact day and exact time when their bins would be collected.
- The situation developed at pace and the service plans were changing frequently which made messaging extremely challenging. This was exacerbated by the complex nature of the patchwork collection arrangements and operational issues within the service once the interim licence was granted.

28. Many of the comments were not requesting information; they were simply stating opinions about what had happened or venting frustration. Even though there were examples of social media users making claims that were simply not true, in the interest of transparency no posts were hidden by the council, except for two from the same person that contained defamatory statements about current and former members of staff. There were a small number of posts using offensive language that were automatically hidden by Facebook.

29. Although the decision not to respond was taken as per the reasons set out above, all social media comments were read. These comments were a valuable listening tool and in the later stages helped inform the service's approach to clearing the backlog of bins.

30. The table at Appendix C shows the volume of social media contacts during the period of disruption.