

PERFORMANCE & CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17 April 2026

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE SERVICE UPDATE

Report by the Director of Public Affairs, Policy and Partnerships

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Performance Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to:**
 - a) Consider and note the current performance of the Customer Experience service;
 - b) Consider and note the impact of recent service redesign and digital transformation activity.

Executive Summary

2. This report provides an overview of the Customer Experience service, including its role within the council, current performance, staffing and structure, use of digital and artificial intelligence, call volumes, and the handling of complaints.
3. Customer Experience plays a critical role as the council's main point of contact with residents, handling high volumes of enquiries across a wide range of services. The service has recently undergone a redesign and has begun implementing digital and AI-enabled tools, including web and voice bots, to improve customer access, manage demand and increase efficiency.
4. Early evidence indicates that these changes are improving customer journeys, reducing avoidable demand on frontline staff, and allowing resources to be focused on more complex cases.

Overview of the service

5. The Customer Experience service is responsible for managing how residents contact and interact with Oxfordshire County Council. It acts as the council's primary 'front door', supporting access to services through phone, digital and written channels, and ensuring enquiries are directed to the right service first time wherever possible.
6. The service provides contact handling on behalf of a number of services, including Adult Social Care and the Highways team. In addition, it manages corporate complaints, statutory complaints, Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and correspondence from MPs, providing a consistent approach to customer feedback.

7. The service moved into the Resources directorate under Public Affairs, Policy and Partnerships in January 2026 following the restructuring of services within Transformation, Digital and Customer Experience. This is a temporary move until the new Director of Technology and Customer Experience joins the council later in the spring.

Service structure and redesign

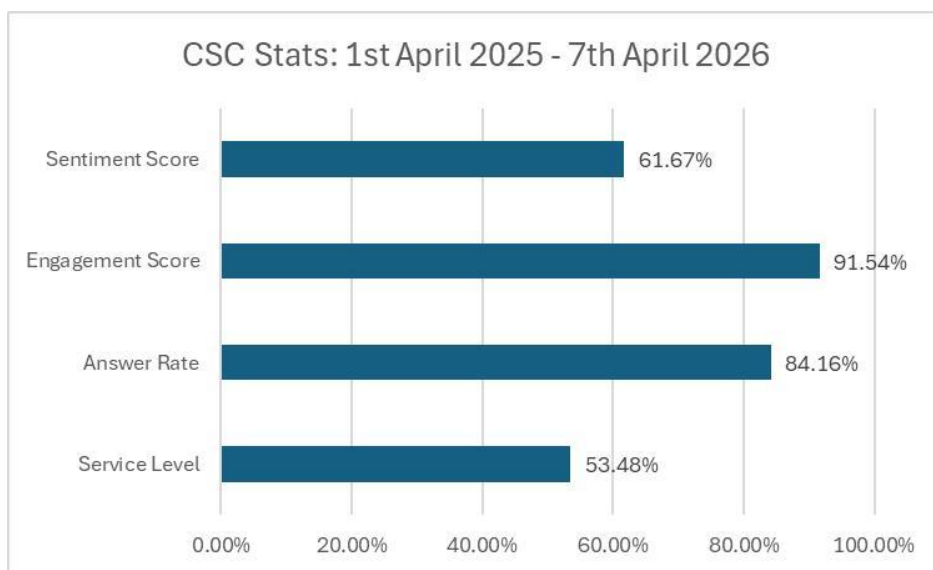
8. In late 2025 Customer Experience underwent a service redesign, with the new structure going live on 1 February 2026. The structure is split into teams delivering specific services that can flex to adapt to demand; it is also designed to be scalable to adapt to local government reorganisation.
9. The service comprises three core functions:
 - i. Operations, which includes the Customer Service Centre
 - ii. Customer Feedback, covering complaints, Freedom of Information requests and MP enquiries
 - iii. Strategic Improvement, responsible for delivering the Customer Experience Strategy and digital transformation roadmap, working closely with digital partners such as Zoom.
10. As part of the redesign, the service looked to consolidate all operational resource in one area, with workforce planning moving under the customer service centre manager and working closer with operational teams. This helps the team better plan for seasonal peaks, such as school admissions, and ensure continuity of service.
11. All roles in Customer Experience were recruited from within the service. This is in line with a wider commitment from Customer Experience to train, develop and provide progression opportunities to the existing team.
12. The new structure is now embedded and working well. Since go-live, the customer contact centre has responded well to the annual spike in school admissions calls by cross-skilling and bolstering resource in the team.

Staff Wellbeing and Engagement

13. In Q3 2025/26 Customer Experience recorded an average absence rate of 2.36 days per full-time equivalent (FTE), slightly below the council average of 2.64 days per FTE. The most common reasons for absence in Q3 2025/26 were colds and flu. Mental health and stress related absences were the fourth and fifth most common reasons for absence.
14. The service experienced an average turnover rate of 11 per cent in 2025, marginally higher than the council average. This is in line with customer contact centres globally, whose turnover rates are higher than other sectors.
15. However, the majority of leavers moved into other roles within the council, reflecting the transferable skills developed within the contact centre and supporting organisational retention.

16. Engagement survey results at directorate level indicated positive views on work-life balance, alongside a desire for clearer development and progression opportunities. The results, published in December 2025, covered the whole directorate (Transformation, Digital and Customer Experience), with no subset available for individual services.
17. Many of those leaving Customer Experience progress within the organisation after developing their skills and gaining experience supporting residents. But the service will continue to ensure development opportunities are in place and progression pathways made clear to colleagues.

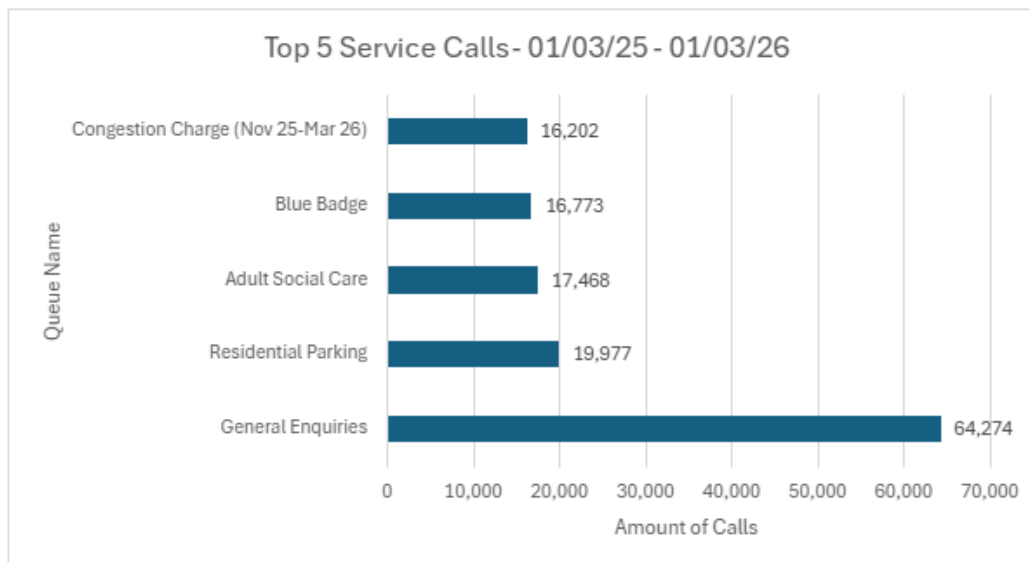
Key Performance Indicators



18. The Customer Service Centre uses four key metrics to measure performance. These are:
 - i. **Sentiment Score:** this reflects how positive or negative customers' interactions are overall, based on language, feedback or survey responses. A higher score indicates more positive customer experiences.
 - ii. **Engagement Score:** this measures how effectively customers are engaging with the service (for example, staying on the line, using self-service properly, or completing interactions). A high score suggests customers are generally able and willing to engage.
 - iii. **Answer Rate:** this shows the proportion of customer contacts that are successfully answered, whether by an advisor or an automated service. A higher rate means fewer contacts are missed.
 - iv. **Service Level:** this measures how quickly contacts are answered against a defined target (for example, within a set number of seconds). A lower score indicates pressure on capacity or peak demand impacting response times.

Call volumes and demand

19. Customer Experience handles very high call volumes across multiple services. The highest-volume areas include General Enquiries, Residential Parking, Adult Social Care, Blue Badge and the temporary congestion charge.



*Congestion charge line started in November 2025

20. Call volumes about blue badges are generally driven by a delay in applications being processed. Following the introduction of the temporary congestion charge, there has been a marked increase in the number of applications for blue badges, many of which do not meet the eligibility requirements. The service continues to manage this demand while working with the communications team to improve customer information and reduce avoidable contact.

Use of Digital and Artificial Intelligence

21. In line with the Customer Experience Strategy, the service is increasingly using digital platforms and AI to improve access, manage demand and deliver efficiencies.
22. Within the contact centre, AI is used to record, transcribe, summarise and categorise all calls, significantly reducing post-call administration. AI is also used to support faster training of new starters through agent assist and knowledge bases.
23. The service is using AI to improve access to services for customers. It enables them to contact the council on a channel and at a time that is convenient for them, including outside normal operating hours. Customers always retain the option to speak to a live advisor.
24. A web chat bot was recently piloted for the temporary congestion charge. In its first month, 1,819 customers interacted with the bot, asking 3,772 questions, with only 5 per cent escalating to a live advisor. This represents a significant channel shift, with customers choosing self-service over phone contact. The

top three topics were: the location of the congestion charging points; how to pay for a PCN; and whether the customer had been through a congestion charging point.

25. The use of the web chat bot represents a channel shift, with customers choosing to have questions answered by the bot, rather than calling or searching the website independently. The service is planning to roll out chat bot technology for highways enquiries and school admissions over the first quarter of 2026/27.
26. A voice bot was launched on 25 March 2026 to replace traditional phone menus. The voice bot uses natural language models to understand the intent behind each call. This means that, instead of navigating long button-press menus, callers can simply explain in their own words what they are calling about, and the voice bot routes them to the right service or provides the information they need.
27. The voice bot was thoroughly tested before launch to ensure accessibility. This included testing with a local community group My Life My Choice from an accessibility and user experience perspective.
28. Early indications show an average 55 per cent reduction in switchboard calls following the launch of the voice bot, equating to a potential reduction of over 35,000 calls per year.
29. The service's digital roadmap includes the wider utilisation of voice bots to answer questions, thereby shortening the average call length with an advisor or completely negating the need for a call with an advisor, and enabling customers to access a wide range of information outside of normal operating hours.
30. The service is committed to driving digital transformation to improve customer access and reduce operating costs. However, it is recognised that some customers will prefer to call the council and this function will continue to be available. A greater proportion of customers who opt to use digital channels and self-serve will mean those customers who need to call will be able to get through to someone more quickly.

Complaints

31. The customer feedback team handles corporate and statutory complaints, freedom of information requests (FOIs), and enquiries from MPs. The team supports services by triaging complaints, applying the correct legislation and process, and advising on handling and timescales. The team reviews and quality-assures responses before they are issued, and ensures learning is identified and actioned where complaints are upheld.
32. Corporate complaints have two stages. At Stage 1, the service investigates the complaint and provides a written response explaining what happened and any action taken. If the complainant remains unhappy, they can request Stage 2, which is a review of the Stage 1 response and how the complaint was handled.

33. Children's statutory complaints have three stages. Stage 1 is local resolution by the service. If issues remain unresolved, Stage 2 involves an independent investigation with formal findings and recommendations. Stage 3 is a review panel that considers whether the Stage 2 investigation was fair and thorough.
34. Adult Social Care statutory complaints have two stages. Stage 1 is investigated by the service. If the complainant remains dissatisfied, the complaint can request a review, this is then reviewed at a more senior level.

Formal complaints overview (Q1–Q3 2025/26)

35. The council received 615 formal complaints during Q1-Q3 2025/26 through its corporate and statutory complaints procedures. These comprised 443 corporate complaints (Stages 1 and 2), 86 Children's statutory complaints (Stages 1–3), and 86 Adult social care statutory complaints. Complaints were raised primarily within Education (SEND), Children's Social Care, and Adult Social Care, reflecting their complexity and statutory nature.
36. Across all formal complaints, the most common issues were:
 - allegations of service failure or poor service quality
 - delays in statutory processes
 - lack of communication or follow-up.
37. Within Education and SEND, complaints frequently relate to statutory timescales, availability of suitable provision, and ongoing communication with families. In Children's Social Care, complaints tend to focus on decision-making, assessments and social work practice. Adult Social Care complaints are more evenly spread, but often relate to assessments, charging decisions and the quality or continuity of care.
38. Of the formal complaints closed during the period:
 - 301 (49%) were upheld or partially upheld
 - 173 (28%) were not upheld, and
 - a small number were resolved informally following investigation.
39. The relatively high upheld/partially upheld rate, particularly within Education/SEND, indicates that complaints remain an important mechanism for identifying learning and service improvement.
40. Overall, the council is getting better at investigating complaints and identifying learning, but timeliness remains an area for improvement. The customer feedback team is working closely with services to improve timeliness and support more consistent handling of complaint responses:
 - Education/SEND: 113 out of 169 on time (67%)
 - Children's Social Care (stage 1): 28 out of 56 on time (50%)
 - Adult Social Care: 80 out of 94 on time (85%)

Complaints about Customer Experience

41. During Q1–Q3 2025/26, there were 15 formal corporate complaints relating to Customer Experience. The majority of complaints related to high volume transactional services, including Blue Badge, Residential Parking Permits and Concessionary Bus Passes, with a small number relating to the customer feedback team.
42. The main issues raised concerned service delivery and communication :
 - Blue Badge: 6
 - Customer Feedback Team: 4
 - Residential Parking Permits: 3
 - Concessionary Bus Passes: 2
43. The majority of complaints were resolved informally or not upheld, with only a small number upheld or partially upheld. It is also important to note that Customer Experience actively resolves most customer dissatisfaction through service requests and early intervention, rather than formal complaints. Many issues raised by residents are transactional in nature and can be addressed quickly by the service without the need to escalate into the formal complaints process. This supports quicker resolution for customers and contributes to the low volume of formal complaints recorded in this area.
44. Overall, the data shows that Customer Experience has low complaint volumes despite very high levels of customer contact.

Financial Implications

45. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. The Customer Experience service operates within approved budgets. Recent service redesign activity and the introduction of digital and AI-enabled tools, including web and voice bots, have been delivered within existing resources. These initiatives are intended to support demand management, reduce avoidable contact and improve efficiency over time, contributing to financial sustainability rather than creating new cost pressures.

Any future changes with material financial implications would be subject to separate approval through the council's established budget and governance processes.

Comments checked by:

Drew Hodgson

Strategic Finance Business Partner – Resources

Legal Implications

46. There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

The Customer Experience service supports the council's compliance with statutory and regulatory requirements, including the handling of corporate and statutory complaints and Freedom of Information requests. Any future proposals involving changes to statutory processes or data use would be subject to legal review as part of the council's governance arrangements.

Comments checked by:

Jay Akbar
Head of Legal & Governance

Equality & Inclusion Implications

47. Customer Experience supports equitable access to services through multiple contact channels. Digital and AI-enabled tools referenced in this report have been implemented with appropriate testing and safeguards, including accessibility considerations, and retain the option for customers to speak to a live advisor.

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