

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET 16 June 2026

Customer Service Centre Update Report of Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Note the recommendations contained in the body of this report and to consider and agree its response to them, for inclusion within the Council budget papers, and
 - b) Agree that, once Cabinet has responded, relevant officers will continue to provide each meeting of the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee with a brief written update on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations for 12 months, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. The Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report providing an update on the Customer Service Centre following the implementation of significant changes to the Customer Service Centre's ways of working at its meeting on 17 April 2026.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation, Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Public Affairs, Policy and Partnerships, Tom Parsons, Head of Customer Experience, Clare Martin, Strategic Improvement Lead, and Richard Merritt,

Operational Manager Contact Oxfordshire for attending the Committee and answering questions.

SUMMARY

5. Councillor Levy introduced the Customer Experience service update. The Council had prioritised enabling residents to contact the authority through channels that suited them, supported by investment in online and telephone systems. Officers introduced the customer experience team and explained that the redesigned service had gone live on 01 February. Management layers had been streamlined and additional capacity added in workforce planning and complaints to improve response times and learning. The service had been structured around customer feedback (primarily covering complaints, Freedom of Information requests, and MP enquiries), a contact centre covering communities and neighbourhoods (excluding adult social care), a dedicated social and health care 'front door' for adult social care, and a small strategic improvements function focused on customer journeys and working with Zoom.
6. A major demand spike linked to the temporary congestion charge was highlighted, which included handling around 15,000 emails handled in six weeks. The focus had been on reducing avoidable 'chase' calls and switchboard misrouting, and that new Zoom reporting had provided better insight than low response-rate satisfaction surveys, alongside reduced waiting times.
7. In response to the report, the Committee engaged in broad-ranging Scrutiny, making enquiries over staff wellbeing and turnover levels, performance targets for the service and their rationale, preventative activity to reduce calls to the Customer Service Centre, the changing role of Customer Service Centre staff working in conjunction with artificial intelligence (AI), and the in-person support for those making enquiries at County Hall.
8. The Committee wishes to stress its praise for the positive improvements made to the Customer Service Centre for their benefits to residents, innovation and efficiency. It does, however, make a single recommendation around AI voicebots which it sees as an important guard-rail for transparency and setting user expectations.

RECOMMENDATION

9. During the meeting, the Committee was given an illustration of the new AI voicebots in action, identifying the intention of a caller from their own words, rather than enforcing a rigid set of options on them. As shown by the illustration, such employment of (AI) and chatbot technology within public services presents significant opportunities to improve responsiveness, efficiency, and ease of use. However, it also raises important considerations

around transparency, trust, and accountability in the Council's interactions with residents.

10. Advising individuals when they are engaging with a chatbot, rather than a human officer, is essential to maintaining public confidence in the Council's services. Transparency in this regard ensures that users have a clear understanding of the nature of the interaction, including its capabilities and limitations. This is particularly important given the realism of voicebots, whose diction has improved significantly. Many residents may expect to be communicating with a person and not be aware that they are not. That distinction may influence the way in which information is interpreted or relied upon.
11. From a governance and accountability perspective, transparency regarding the use of AI aligns with principles of openness and good administration. It reduces the risk of misunderstanding, complaint, or reputational harm arising from perceptions that the Council is obscuring the nature of its services. It also reflects emerging best practice across the public sector, where clear labelling of automated systems is increasingly expected.
12. Finally, explicitly identifying chatbot interactions can help manage user expectations and improve service quality. Where users are aware they are interacting with an automated system, they are more likely to frame queries appropriately and less likely to become frustrated by any remaining limitations in the technology. This, in turn, can support more effective use of staff time by directing complex queries to officers where professional judgement is required.
13. For these reasons, it is considered appropriate and proportionate that the Council should advise residents when they are interacting with chatbot systems as part of its commitment to transparency, accountability, and high-quality public service.

Recommendation 1: That the Cabinet ensures that there is full transparency over whether a caller to the Council is interacting with an AI voicebot or a human.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

14. The Committee does not necessarily intend to consider the Customer Service Centre as an item again in the current municipal year. However, in view of its pervasive impact on the Council's activity the Committee is expected to request a further report on AI usage and implementation.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

15. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a

formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.

16. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

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Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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