



Date:	20 July 2023
Portfolio:	Finance and Council Reform
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1. The following key decisions were made in the period since my last Policy & Scrutiny report dated 14 June 2023:

- 23 June 2023 - Future Plan for the Microsoft Enterprise Agreement contract
- 23 June 2023 – Coroners Court Refurbishment and Extension
- 03 July 2023 – Appointment of a Main Contractor for Works to the Tresham Centre

2. The following report includes my priorities and delivery progress to date:

2.1 Statement of Accounts

The Annual Accounts for the Council were published on 16 June. While they did not meet the deadline of 31 May set by the Government, the council outperformed the majority of local authorities in publishing in the middle of June. We are currently in the period of public inspection. I have been advised that officers see no reason why the external audit should not be completed by its deadline.

2.2 Revenue Collection

Revenues collection in 2022/23 was good.

NNDR “In year” collection rose from 91.8% in 2021/22 to 95.5% in 2022/23. This is a very good outcome given the insolvency of a large number of companies following the pandemic. The service is well placed to improve collection further in 2023/24, indeed collection in the first couple of months of 2023/24 is on a par with the Council’s best ever collection percentage of 97.6% achieved just before the pandemic.

Council Tax collection also achieved a good result increasing “in year” collection from 91.5% in 2021/22 to 93.6% in 2022/23, although this remains below the pre-

pandemic collection level of 96.7%. The achieved collection level was especially pleasing given that significant resources were diverted to administer the government's £150 Energy Scheme during 2022/23. The government's scheme also meant that Council Tax recovery had to be halted for a large part of the year. It is expected that the service will deliver further improvements in collection in the future, providing there are no more government schemes to administer. Collection in the first couple of months of 2023/24 is showing further improvement.

Both revenues met their business plan in year collection targets.

There are three main reasons for council tax collection being lower in 2022/23 compared to pre-pandemic levels:

- Economic fallout from the pandemic and cost of living crisis
- Reduction in collection resources as resources had to be re-directed to administer the government £150 Energy Scheme.
- Reduction in recovery action. The administration of the government's energy scheme meant that recovery had to be suspended for a significant part of the year.

In line with Fairer Westminster objectives, the Council transitioned to an Ethical Recovery process partway through 2022/23, with the new process outlined below. It is not considered that the Council's new Ethical Recovery process has had any significant effect on the 2022/23 collection level, although the 2023/24 financial year will enable a proper analysis of the effect on Council Tax collection.

Ethical Recovery is made up of four standards: -

- a) Pro-active promotion of the Council's 100% Council Tax Support scheme for residents struggling to pay their Council Tax
- b) Long-term payment arrangements being agreed, i.e. no longer insisting that Council Tax debts are paid in full by 31 March.
- c) Increased use of Council Tax Hardship (Section 13A) allowances for residents with exceptional circumstances / current inability to pay. £200k was allocated to Council Tax Hardship funding as part of the Council's initial Cost of Living £1m funding, the majority of which was utilised in 2022/23. Initial funding of £150k has been allocated for 2023/24 and the requirement for further funding will be kept under review.

- d) Ensuring that the removal of goods by the Council's enforcement agents can only take place for Council Tax debts where the debtor has the ability to pay but is refusing to pay, i.e. "won't pay" residents. Authorisation for all Council Tax removals by the Council's enforcement agents must be approved by the Director of Finance & Resources or the Director of Revenues & Benefits – to date the Council's enforcement agents have made no such requests for Council Tax debts.

2.3 Cost of Living Support

The Council's approach for spending the £3,9m Household Support Fund for 2023/24 was approved in May 2023. The areas of focus will include vulnerable families, vulnerable young people, households receiving benefits, referral-based schemes and food charities. This funding has been topped up with £247,000 of Council funding. It is anticipated that 41,000 people will be supported through £4.1m of spending over the year, with targeted help towards families eligible for free school meals, vulnerable young people and households receiving Housing Benefit/Council Tax Support. Letters with £150 supermarket gift cards will be sent in the coming days to about 2,400 households who are known to have low incomes but are not eligible for the Government's Cost of Living payment.

2.4 Council Reform

Council Meetings

The 28 June Council meeting was the first held since the rules were changed to allow greater and more flexible public participation. Anyone who lives, works or studies in Westminster is now invited to pose a question or present a petition in-person at Ordinary Full Council, this can be about a local issue or a wider question about the council. Petitions can be presented if they receive at least 100 signatures, and any presented to Full Council will receive both a verbal and written response.

As Members will be aware, the public participation on 28 June was a great success. Six residents raised a wide variety of issues affecting the City of Westminster, and Cabinet Members gave helpful replies. Those who participated were given the opportunity to speak briefly afterwards to give their views on the process; I encourage everyone to watch those videos on the Council's Youtube channel.

2.5 Digital and Innovation

Cabinet responsibilities for the digital service were reassigned on 29 June when Cllr Sanquest was appointed Cabinet Member for Resident Participation, Consultation Reform and Leisure. She has taken over responsibility for:

- The corporate contact centre;
- Corporate Complaints;
- The digital transformation of the Council's services in collaboration with other Cabinet Members and partner agencies where necessary;
- Applications, core digital tools and platforms which enable public engagement with the Council e.g. the website, Report-It and other such functions.

I will retain responsibility for:

- The Infrastructure for the Council's Information and telecommunications systems;
- Cyber security;
- Architecture and data

IT Disaggregation

Progress on the disaggregation continues, with services migrating gradually to ensure adequate staffing and resilience in the system. Updates will be provided to the Committee as the programme progresses.

Report-it

We have recently published a web page to help keep Westminster communities engaged and informed on the transformation of the report-it service. The new webpage will be updated to inform on engagement events, recent changes and enables those interested to contact the team directly to be first to hear about updates. You can find this page at: [Report it review | Westminster City Council](#).

Although this is a crucial tool for the team to work transparently and out in the open it will not replace in person engagement as the team keep those who are not online considered in this process.

As part of making the reporting experience easier and faster, the team have provided updated digital journeys for reporting problems with abandoned dockless bikes and electric vehicle charging points. These include clearer explanations of when to use Report it and when to contact to operators directly, with quick links to do so.

The report-it team have undertaken several rounds of testing with residents on improvements to the Report It landing page and improvements to the noise reporting journey. These improvements will be released iteratively to deliver maximum value for the communities with improvements to the current reporting experience for noise expected by the end of Summer this year.

Whilst the team are completing these 'quick win' changes they are also working to re-design the entire end to end reporting experience to re-imagine new outstanding reporting experiences. Delivery of this new experience will begin in early Autumn with an aim to have the three priority journeys (Waste, Highways, Noise) completely optimised for users by the end of this year.

Corporate Contact Centre

The Council's in-house corporate centre handles around 11,000 calls per month, this is 96% of the total demand with online form requests and emails accounting for 4% of the volume. Performance has been particularly strong across the last three months with an average of 97% calls answered (target 92%) and 89% of calls answered within service level (target 70%).

All customers calling the contact centre can opt into a post call survey and in May 91% of customers were satisfied with the overall quality of the service provided. This is influenced by an improved first call resolution at 71%. The contact centre continues to see positive improvements across all measures in post call surveys and the team have recently received refresher training in the customer service standards expected.

Since January, we have continued to see a month-on-month improvement in the average time taken to handle calls, this is currently 5:29 minutes which has reduced the total number of calls abandoned (<4%).

Emails and online form processing requests are currently being handled well within the targeted service levels and the team are on track to deliver against all the key performance indicators.

Corporate Contact Centre	Trend	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	AVG	3 Months AVG	YTD
Calls Offered		11,367	11,017	12,934	10,217	11,160	11,339	11,437	56,695
Calls Answered		10,618	10,415	12,525	9,803	10,864	10,845	11,064	54,225
Calls Answered (%)		93.4%	94.5%	96.8%	95.9%	97.3%	95.62%	97%	95.6%
Service Level (target 70%)		72.7%	80.2%	88.9%	88.2%	90.5%	84.08%	89%	82.7%
Average Handle Time		05:38	05:37	05:27	05:24	05:21	05:29	05:24	05:29
Customer Satisfaction		88.9%	90.6%	87.9%	89.9%	91.2%	89.7%	90%	89.29%
First Contact Resolution		70.6%	68.3%	68.8%	69.2%	70.7%	69.5%	70%	69.80%

The Westminster Employment Service have secured funding to allow the placement of 5 Westminster Residents in the contact centre to be extended until 30 September with the additional resident securing permanent employment in the Council. This has allowed 6 residents to benefit from obtaining the skills required to work in a customer service environment, the associated training and development whilst also benefiting from the employment placement.

Emergency Out Of Hours - Agilisys

Agilisys handle approximately 6,000 out of hours calls a month to the emergency out of hours service with around 50% of calls relating to emergency housing repairs.

Performance has been steady since January averaging 93.31% of all calls being answered.

Performance reduced in March due to several issues across the month including: blocks reporting no heating/hot water including an ongoing issue across a weekend; increased call volumes relating to homeless/temporary accommodation requirements mainly due to the cold weather and activation of SWEP; technical issues with the repairs contractor system resulting in increased outbound calls.

Agilisys offer the same post call survey as the corporate and housing contact centres with performance levels for customer satisfaction and First Contact Resolution encouraging. The number of verbatim comments left has resulted in some very positive feedback which has been fed back to the individuals.

Out Of Hours	Trend	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	AVG	3 Months AVG	YTD
Calls Offered		6,338	5,394	6,483	6,467	6,530	6,242	6,493	31,212
Calls Answered		5,940	5,068	5,885	6,139	6,108	5,758	6,044	29,140
Calls Answered (%)		93.72%	93.96%	90.78%	94.92%	93.54%	93.3%	93%	93.4%
Service Level (target 70%)		74.2%	76.8%	68.1%	76.7%	72.6%	73.7%	72%	73.7%
Average Handle Time		06:34	06:56	08:02	07:05	07:20	07:11	07:29	07:11
Customer Satisfaction		98.0%	98.5%	81.3%	94.2%	97.2%	93.8%	91%	93.8%
First Contact Resolution		100.0%	83.9%	87.5%	100.0%	91.2%	92.5%	93%	92.5%

Revenues & Benefits (Capita)

The Council Tax Energy Rebate (£150) increased the call volume into the R&B contact centre considerably. Capita have worked extremely hard to increase the % of calls answered within service level and are now back within target, performance continues to be closely monitored.

Revenues & Benefits (Capita)	Trend	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	AVG	3 Months AVG	YTD
Calls Offered		14,518	12,464	16,251	17,536	19,390	16,032	17,726	80,159
Calls Answered		13,695	12,207	15,851	17,162	18,980	15,579	17,331	77,895
Calls Answered (%)		94.3%	97.9%	97.5%	97.9%	97.9%	97.11%	98%	97.2%
Service Level (target 80%)		58.98%	72.83%	74.53%	79.90%	87.85%	74.82%	81%	74.8%
Average Wait Time		06:52	02:01	02:28	02:34	02:59	02:40	02:40	02:40
Average Handle Time		07:28	07:31	07:14	07:51	07:32	07:31	07:32	07:31

Parking (NSL)

Parking went live with a new back-office systems in April. This has resulted in high call volumes which in turn has impacted wait times and the % of calls answered. The

team are working closely with the development team to resolve the issues driving contacts and the contact centre is in the process of deploying additional resources to meet demand.

Parking (NSL)	Trend	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	AVG	3 Months AVG	YTD
Calls Offered		9,717	8,821	10,362	14,211	12,853	11,193	12,475	55,964
Calls Answered		8,273	8,254	9,100	8,188	9,881	8,739	9,056	43,696
Calls Answered (%)		85.1%	93.6%	87.8%	57.6%	76.9%	80.21%	74%	80.2%
Service Level (target 70%)		55.21%	64.01%	58.61%	10.29%	36.37%	44.90%	35%	44.9%
Average Wait Time		02:05	01:16	02:03	10:58	04:59	06:00	06:00	06:00
Average Handle Time		05:29	05:37	05:09	05:56	06:23	05:42	05:49	05:42

Housing

The Housing Contact Centre team handled 95% of calls against a target of 92% of calls answered across January to May. Service level was 75% against the target of 70% delivering a strong performance. Due to a significant increase in training delivery in April performance dipped but has since returned to normal levels. Average Handle Time increased slightly over April and May, as expected, whilst agents embedded the training.

Housing (WCC)	Trend	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	AVG	3 Months AVG	YTD
Calls Offered		19,140	16,277	20,575	15,144	14,987	17,225	16,902	86,123
Calls Answered		18,238	15,918	19,253	13,710	14,476	16,319	15,813	81,595
Calls Answered (92%)		95.3%	97.8%	93.6%	90.5%	96.6%	94.76%	94%	94.7%
Service Level (target 70%)									0.0%
Average Wait Time		00:42	00:23	00:58	01:33	00:31	01:00	01:00	01:00
Average Handle Time		11:18	11:02	11:27	12:27	12:15	11:41	12:03	11:41

Housing Solutions (RMG)

Changes to the allocation scheme in March 2023 contributed to a 29% increase in calls during the month compared to February 2023. Over the 5-month period January 2023 – May 2023 there were a total of 34,456 calls to HSS, an increase of 14% compared to the 30,140 calls over the previous 5-month period August 2022 – December 2022. Over the period the % of calls answered and calls resolved at first point of contact have declined as call volume has increased. Average wait times have seen a small increase too as a result of the increase in volume.

Housing Solutions (RMG)	Trend	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	AVG	3 Months AVG	YTD
Calls Offered		5,243	6,441	8,342	6,648	7,800	6,895	7,597	34,474
Calls Answered		4,720	5,353	6,818	5,625	6,061	5,715	6,168	28,577
Calls Answered (%)		88.0%	83.0%	81.7%	85.0%	82.0%	83.95%	83%	83.9%
First Point Of Contact (%)		93.00%	87.00%	86.00%	85.00%	82.00%	86.60%	84%	86.6%
Average Wait Time		03:15	04:19	04:21	04:07	05:13	04:33	04:33	04:33
Average Handle Time		04:12	04:29	04:29	04:12	04:26	04:21	04:22	04:21