

Meeting of:	Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee
Date of Meeting:	Wednesday, 13 January 2021
Relevant Scrutiny Committee:	Homes and Safe Communities
Report Title:	Impact of Covid19 on Contact OneVale
Purpose of Report:	To inform committee of how the Corona Virus pandemic has impacted on Customer Relations and how the service has responded to support residents.
Report Owner:	Rob Thomas, Managing Director
Responsible Officer:	Tony Curliss, Operational Manager for Customer Relations
Elected Member and Officer Consultation:	N/A
Policy Framework:	The report is a matter for consideration by the Scrutiny Committee
<p>Executive Summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This report sets out the key challenges Contact OneVale (C1V) has faced during the Covid19 Pandemic, the service response to these and the impact on service performance. • In addition, the report includes details of the new collaborative services developed by the service to support our most vulnerable citizens. • As a result of providing a single point of contact for residents to access social care, housing, benefits and other critical services C1V was identified by the Council as a key service at the start of the initial lockdown in March 2020. • Focus was on ensuring that we could continue to support most vulnerable residents and those in crisis, including those shielding. • The service established the Covid19 Crisis Support line to assist the most vulnerable resident and those in crisis as a result of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions. The focus was on ensuring residents had access to food and medication. This included supporting the Welsh Government's food parcel service. • To minimise the risk of staff Covid19 infection C1V moved from operating from a single office location to a dispersed operation. While this was successful in minimising Covid19 infection amongst staff, it did present technical and performance management challenges. 	

- In order to maximise resource availability residents were encouraged to access non-urgent services online via the council's website. This resulted in a 32.5% reduction in call volumes (to 93,000) between April and October 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. Where residents accessed service online many of these were still handled by C1V due to lack of integration between eforms and Oracle CRM.
- Despite the high volume of change and the challenges experienced the service has implemented measures to support residents. This includes implementation of a Chatbot to assist with Covid19 enquiries. There is currently an average of 450 chatbot citizen interactions per week.
- A bilingual webchat service has also been implemented to support residents accessing services online. This communication channel is popular with younger residents. Over 2000 webchats have been initiated since the service launch in September.
- C1V has supported other council service in responding to the pandemic, in particular with neighbourhood Services and Civic Reception services.
- C1V has also provided support for partner organisations, assisting Cardiff and Vale University Health Board establish the Cav247 service to protect A&E services and Transport for Wales establish the Fflecsi demand responsive transport service to allow key workers and vulnerable citizens to access Covid Safe public transport.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that Scrutiny Committee (Homes and Safe Communities) note the content of the report in outlining the way in which C1V has both been impacted by and supported the Council's response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Reasons for Recommendations

1. The Committee recognise the impact of the pandemic on C1V and the services provided to residents, acknowledge the support provided by Contact OneVale as part of the council's overall response to the pandemic and recognises the innovative collaborative work the service has undertaken with partners to deliver services supporting vulnerable residents across Wales.

1. Background

- 1.1 Contact OneVale (C1V) provides a single point of contact for all council services, resolving around 75% of all residents' enquiries without having to transfer residents through to or arrange contact from a service expert.
- 1.2 The service handles multi-channel enquiries from residents across telephone, email, web and paper. It also delivers Telecare Monitoring, Reception, Blue Car Badge and Concessionary Travel Pass services.
- 1.3 As well as high volume, relatively low complexity calls relating to a range of Council services (such as waste management), C1V importantly delivers high complexity and high-risk services such as Adult Social Care Assessments, Housing and Homelessness, Shared Regulatory Services and Registrars.
- 1.4 C1V operates in a large open plan office environment which is shared with Adult Serves Intake and Assessment team, Telecare Project team as well as Cardiff and Vale University Health Board Communications Hub and GP Out of Hours services.
- 1.5 Immediately prior to the pandemic C1V had been through a significant period of change, replacing its existing contact centre technology with a new cloud-hosted platform designed to provide improved functionality and flexibility.
- 1.6 The Council classified C1V to be a critical service at the onset of the Covid19 pandemic as described in the Cabinet report of March 23rd 2020.
- 1.7 The pandemic has had a significant impact on how the services that C1V supports are delivered, the scope of services delivered and, on the resource available to deliver these services.

2. Key Issues for Consideration

- 2.1 In line with the corporate response to the onset of the Covid19 pandemic in March 2020, Contact OneVale's initial priority was on protecting the services delivered to our most vulnerable residents and those in crisis. During the initial

lockdown period supporting those shielding due to underlying health conditions in our community was our key priority.

- 2.2** In order to meet this objective C1V has worked closely with other council departments, collaborated with external agencies, made operational changes and overcome significant technical and resource challenges.
- 2.3** Initial assessment identified the potential of losing significant numbers of call handling staff through Covid19 infection as the key threat to service continuity.
- 2.4** The immediate response was to ask residents only to contact the C1V in an emergency and to access non-urgent services online. This contributed to a reduction in call volumes of 32.5% between March and October compared to the same period in 2019. However, almost all of the requests for service made online had to be dealt with by C1V due to lack of integration between eforms and Oracle CRM. Completed forms simply created emails containing details of the resident's enquiry that then had to be transcribed and dealt with by C1V staff.
- 2.5** To help mitigate the risk of significant reduction in staff resources due Covid19 infection call handling staff were initially split over two office sites and subsequently moved to home working, made possible as a result of implementing the new contact centre technology at the beginning of 2020.
- 2.6** This new way of working presented challenges for management and call handlers. Initially technical issues resulting in intermittent connectivity to the Council's ICT network resulted in significant downtime for call handlers causing a reduction in available call handling resource and longer wait times for customers. As the Council's ICT department improved connectivity to the network, systems outages for homeworking staff has significantly decreased.
- 2.7** Working in this way made day to day operational support for call handling staff more difficult. In the traditional contact centre environment support from Team Leaders and experienced colleagues had been readily available. Working in this dispersed way disrupted this with support reverting to telephone contact. This meant that resolution for some enquiries has taken longer. The impact of this was exacerbated by the fact that many of the services that C1V supports necessarily changed processes and procedures and ceased some operations quickly in response to the pandemic.
- 2.8** To support staff to provide the best possible service to our residents, subject specific "chats" on Microsoft Teams were created which allowed staff to quickly access support from colleagues. In addition, a dedicated telephone line has been set up to access Team Leader support, ensuring that residents have continued to receive a positive experience of accessing services. The new contact centre technology has ensured that the management team have continued access to real time information about demand and call handler performance allowing informed decision making about best use of resources to support our residents.

These measures have ensured that First Contact Resolution has continued at circa 85% during the pandemic.

- 2.9** Increased staff absence has been a significant feature of the period. Although only one member of staff has tested positive for Covid19, a significant number of staff have been required to self-isolate during April and May when testing was not available. 3 members of staff were required to isolate as a result of their own underlying health conditions or those of relatives they live with. In addition, a further 5 members of staff were required to self-isolate for 10 days as a result of experiencing Covid19 symptoms. As home working was not available at this time self-isolating staff resulted in a reduction in call handling resources and impacted on call handling performance with significantly longer wait times for citizens.
- 2.10** In addition, there has been a developing trend of staff absence due to mental health issues during the period, peaking in October with 9 members of staff not able to attend work. Many of these absences have been as a result of stress and anxiety caused by issues outside of the workplace, however the change to home working with reduced social interaction has been identified as a contributing factor in some cases. To address these issues weekly welfare calls have been introduced to allow Team Leaders to keep in contact with staff and make positive interventions were possible when issues start to occur. Weekly Microsoft Teams video sessions have also been introduced and are designed to allow staff dedicated time to discuss any work-related issues in an informal way. In addition, staff have been encouraged to engage with colleagues via the Microsoft Teams chats. Staff have also been given the opportunity to attend the office in a socially distanced, Covid19 safe way on a rota basis as a way of keeping in contact with colleagues and of receiving training and coaching should they wish to do so. These actions are supplementary to the regular implementation of the Council's absence management policies and use of Occupational Health referrals.
- 2.11** Despite these actions during October 2020 a total of 826 hours were lost to sickness representing an average of 5 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) per day, leaving an average of only 10.5 FTE call handlers per day to respond to customer enquiries across all channels. Interestingly absence peaked during the first week of the "fire break lock down".
- 2.12** As a result of these operational challenges and despite these measures the average time residents had to wait to have their telephone call answered was over the period was 243 seconds.
- 2.13** Despite these challenges C1V has been able to introduce new services to support residents. In April a crisis line was launched to support shielding residents who needed help with accessing food and medicine. Working with Adult Social Services, Glamorgan Voluntary Services, Age Connects and other voluntary agencies and as part of the vale Heroes initiative, the service assisted around 1,100 of our most vulnerable residents by telephone to access food and medicine. In addition, the service worked with other Council services to ensure

that Welsh Government food parcel deliveries were successfully and to ensure that shielding residents were safe and well when delivery could not be completed.

- 2.14** This support was implemented using existing C1V resources, colleagues redeployed from other Council services and by reducing call handling resources available to answer enquiries on other services.
- 2.15** To assist residents searching for Covid19 support on the council's website the service has implemented a bilingual chatbot which uses artificial intelligence to allow residents impacted by Covid19 to access support from the Council and partner organisations. The chatbot operates 24 hours per day, 365 days per year and has seen resident sessions initiated during evenings and weekends. Since its launch in September the chatbot has recorded an average of 420 interactions per week.
- 2.16** This crisis line service is set to continue, under the Vale Heroes banner, to support vulnerable residents and those in crisis as a result of the pandemic for as long as required. The focus of the service will expand to include broader wellbeing and financial issues as the impact of extended restrictions and the economic impact evolves. Work is ongoing with Adult Services, Housing, Council Tax, Benefits and external partners to develop a process to ensure that those most impacted are able to access help and support as quickly and easily as possible.
- 2.17** In September the service also introduced a new Webchat services, available in both English and Welsh, to support customers access services online and to provide a contact channel favoured by younger residents. The service is available during normal business hours and 2070 webchats have taken place since launch.
- 2.18** During the pandemic C1V has been keen to support other council services respond to the challenges presented. The service worked with Neighbourhood Services colleagues to use existing technology to develop and implement a successful online booking service which has allowed Household Waste Recycling Centres to reopen in a safe way.
- 2.19** In addition, we have worked to reintroduce limited reception services at the Civic Offices on a Covid-safe appointment basis, ensuring that residents who don't have access to the internet or who have complex needs can still access services.
- 2.20** C1V has had the opportunity to assist and collaborate with other public sector organisations to support vulnerable citizens across Wales and other public sector services.
- 2.21** Transport for Wales (TfW) was tasked by Welsh Government with ensuring that key workers who relied on public transport to get to work and vulnerable citizens who relied on public transport to undertake food shopping and access

medication could continue to do so safely. In May 2020 TfW introduced Fflecsi, a demand responsive bus service in Newport allowing customers to travel at a time and be picked up from a location that suits them.

- 2.22** C1V worked closely with TfW to design and deliver a contact centre booking service. The service has expanded to provide services in Cardiff, Conwy, Denbigh, Pembrokeshire, Prestatyn and Rhondda Cynon Taff. Since its launch C1V has handled over 9000 travel booking requests and other Fflecsi enquiries.
- 2.23** C1V has also worked closely with Cardiff and Vale University Health Board to assist with the delivery of the new Cav247 service. Designed to ensure that A&E services are protected from Covid19 infection and do not get overwhelmed by demand, Cav247 offers a telephone-based triage and appointment booking solution to patients prior to attending A&E. C1V helped design and build this service at pace using the new cloud-hosted contacted centre platform.
- 2.24** The Covid19 pandemic has presented many challenges for Customer Relations service. It has emphasised the fact that the existing CRM solution does not adequately meet the needs of the council or the needs of our residents. A project has been initiated to develop the functionality required to provide excellent online customer experience, giving greater control to the customer and opportunities to create efficient, customer focussed services using a modern digital customer experience platform. This will be actively progressed in the coming months.

3. How do proposals evidence the Five Ways of Working and contribute to our Well-being Objectives?

- 3.1** C1V supports the delivery of all Council services and is instrumental in ensuring the Corporate Plan, Covid19 response and Recovery Strategy's objectives may be progressed.
- 3.2** This report highlights the way in which the five ways of working are an intrinsic part of operations.
- 3.3** Customer Relations has worked in a collaborative way to develop new service propositions with other Council departments and external partners to support residents during the pandemic.
- 3.4** New ways of working that have clear benefits for residents and the council are being embedded as permanent changes so that these benefits can continue in the longer term.
- 3.5** Key internal and external stakeholders have been involved in the development and delivery of new ways of working and new services.

4. Resources and Legal Considerations

Financial

4.1 There are no additional financial implications associated with this report.

Employment

4.2 There are no employment implications directly related to this report. The body of the report highlights the impact on staffing resources over the period.

Legal (Including Equalities)

4.3 There are no direct legal implications relating to this report.

4.4 C1V has continued to offer multiple communications channels to ensure that access to services is maintained for all residents.

5. Background Papers

None.