

APPENDIX 1a

Average Call Waiting Times

Background

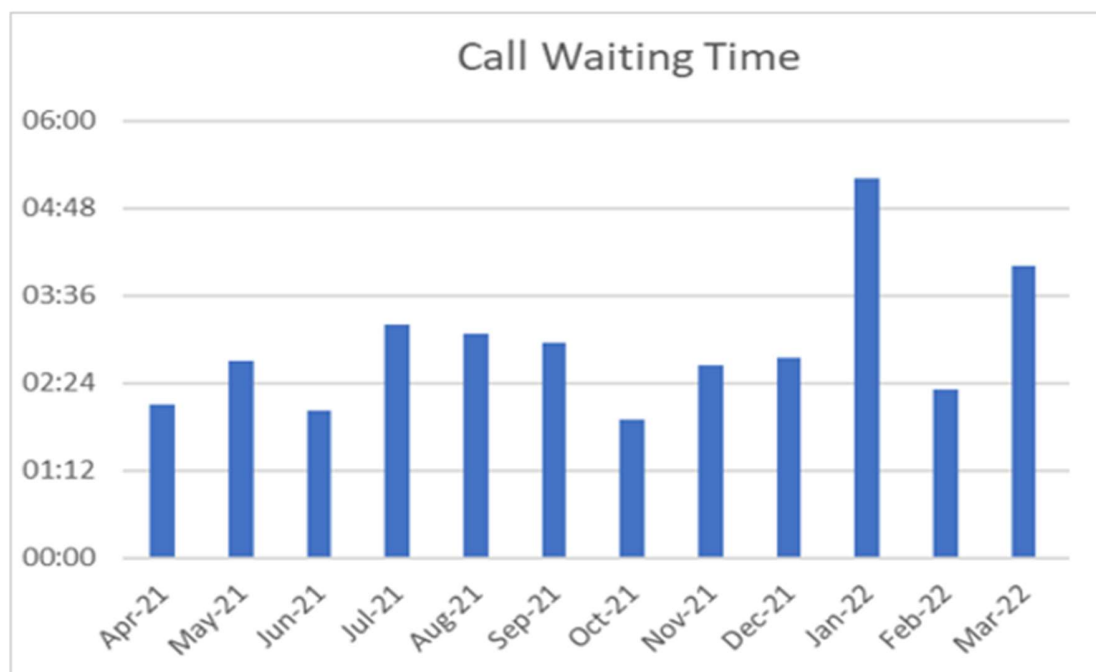
The indicator measures the length of time it takes one of our Customer Services Team to answer a call once the customer has listened to the initial recorded options and selected an appropriate queue.

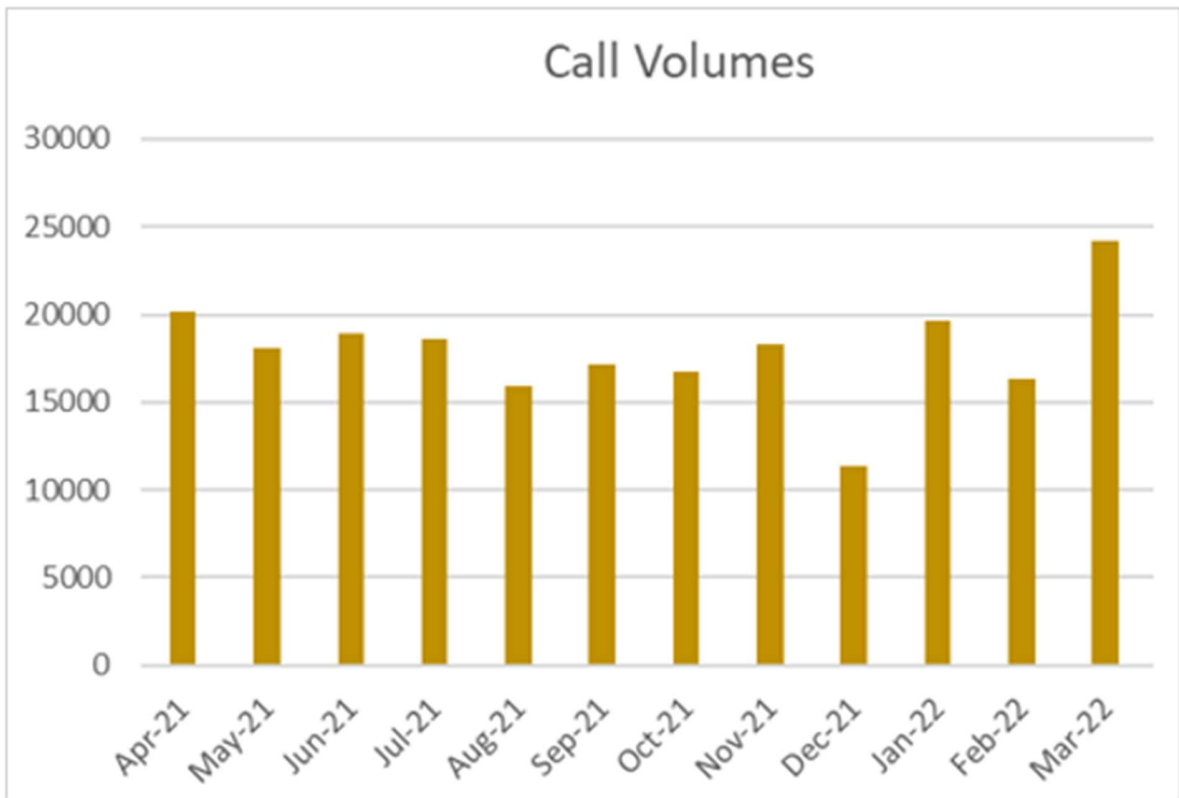
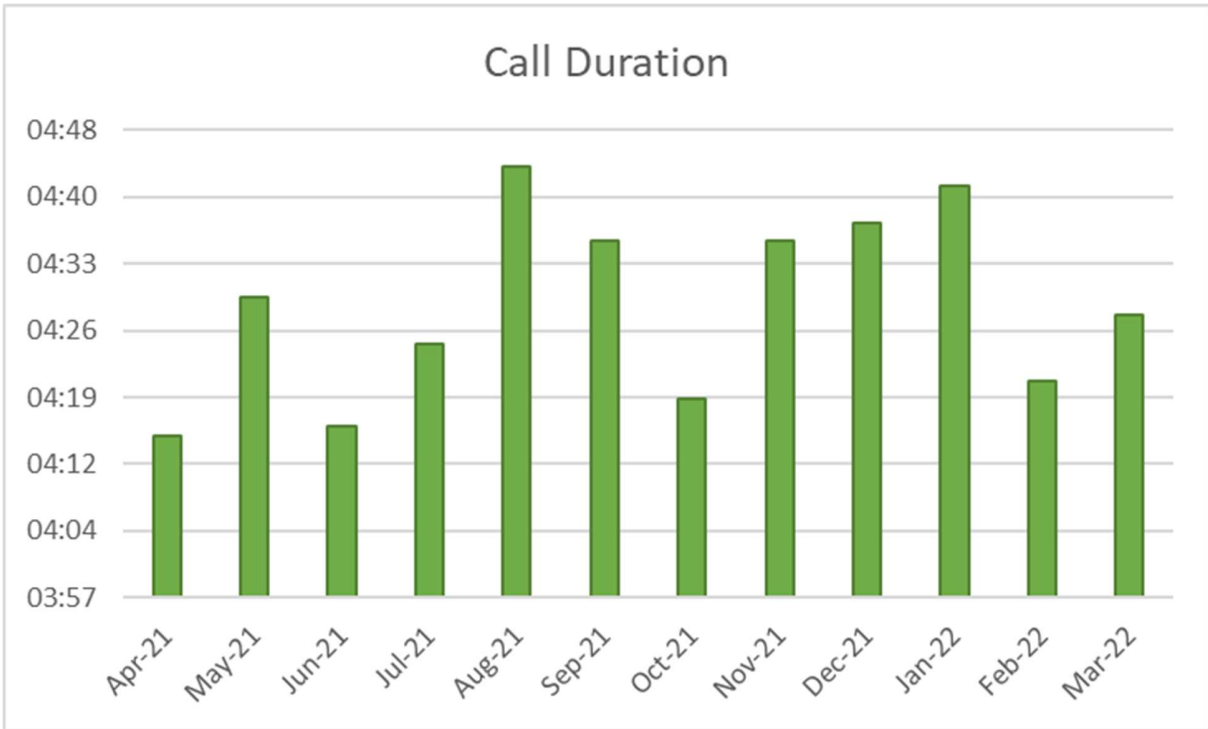
Our target is to answer all calls within 60 seconds. This is an ambitious target when compared with many other organisations where it is not uncommon to be waiting longer than 5 minutes. There is a clear relationship between the number and length of calls and the levels of staff resourcing required to maintain an answer rate of 60 seconds or below.

We have largely managed to meet this target since the current Customer Services team and approach was implemented. There are periods of the year when we are busier, March and April tend to see us receiving more calls due to Council Tax and Business Rate bills, garden waste renewal letters etc.

The current position

During 2021/2022 and the beginning of the current financial year we have missed the target of 60 seconds for most months. The performance figures for each month are detailed below.





Call data analysis

We have undertaken detailed analysis of the call data we hold to try and understand why this is happening. This analysis indicates that:

- Call volumes have increased – call volumes in 2021 have been higher than in 2020. The overall trend of call volumes mapped over the past 2 years indicates that volumes are increasing although this appears to now have stabilised at the higher rate.
- Call duration has increased – the length of calls each month in 2021 is higher than the previous average. The average has increased from 265 seconds to 326 seconds per call. Whilst this change appears small this equates to an additional 12 hours of work per day.

We have identified a range of factors which we believe are impacting on call volumes, call duration and our capacity to answer calls within the target time. The key message is that there is no single reason or simple answer. The factors are summarised below:

- Organisation wide we are now operating again at pretty much full capacity following the Covid crisis. This means, for example, that we have recommenced things such as our full recovery activities for Revenues and Benefits, miscellaneous income etc.

In addition the public are now expecting us to be operating largely as normal. All of this generates calls and some services will be dealing with backlogs that developed as a result of the Covid restrictions.

- Waste collection issues – over the summer and autumn we received significantly increased numbers of calls due to the disruption to waste collection.
- Following the waste disruption we introduced the Recycle More program which increased call volumes
- There has been a general increase in the length of calls. This is both a good and a bad thing. In some cases, as with waste, it indicates problems that are simply taking longer to deal with. However, this also indicates that our customer champions are increasingly able to deal with more at the first point of contact i.e. the calls are longer because they are sorting the issue for the customer rather than passing the call to the back office.
- Channel shift – we have, through necessity during the Covid crisis, channel-shifted many of our customers to the telephone who would previously have visited our offices. This is good news in respect of moving them to a more cost-effective way of dealing with them. However, our area offices are now starting to re-open which requires us to pull staff away from the phones to man the various front desks, which obviously reduces our telephone answering capacity. Footfall at all of our offices is low.
- Staff turnover – Over the last three months we have seen a number of our most experienced staff move on to other roles within the Council. We are recruiting to minimise the gap this causes but it takes time to recruit and train new staff.
- Experience Gap – With the staff turnover we've experienced a skills gap, especially in areas that require experience such as Council Tax and Repairs.
- The government's announcement of the £150 Energy Payments has caused a significant increase in call volumes over the last 2 months, these were mostly concerning Direct Debits and arrears so required highly skilled staff to resolve

them. In one week we received over 6500 calls which is a 50% increase on what we would expect for this time of year. Two additional agency staff were recruited and staff from other teams were brought in to help manage this situation but the availability of Council Tax trained staff at year end was low.

Actions being taken

We are taking immediate actions to alleviate the problem and also identifying longer term actions. Action is already underway through the Customer Experience Programme to identify areas for improvement, and we are using some of the findings from the programme to identify changes.

In the latter part of last year we identified that we had a key risk relating to staff welfare. Ongoing high call volumes backed up by increasingly frustrated customers has an impact on the resilience of the staff. This is likely a driver for the increased number of staff moving to other teams.

In preparation for Recycle More and to provide additional call handling capacity we recruited additional, temporary resource into the team to help manage the demand and waste calls were handled well. We have retained several of these agency workers to cover the staff who have moved to other teams.

We have also been working closely with the Housing team to improve the customer experience by increasing the number of cases Customer Champions can deal with at first point of contact and to provide an escalation route to resolve issues that would otherwise become complaints.

We have used the data we collected to analyse our resourcing requirements. In part this involves reviewing if we had sufficient staff with the right skills to answer the anticipated volume of calls and this has led to us approving the recruitment of two additional staff above our usual headcount for the rest of the financial year. We are also looking at other changes that will increase customer self serve and reduce calls such as improving our website layout and web forms.