



**Babergh and Mid Suffolk
Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

Customer Services

This paper provides an overview of the different ways customers can engage with our services and some of the volumes and trends.

Across customer services we offer various ways for people to access high quality services and support, I have summarised these below and more detail is provided throughout the paper:

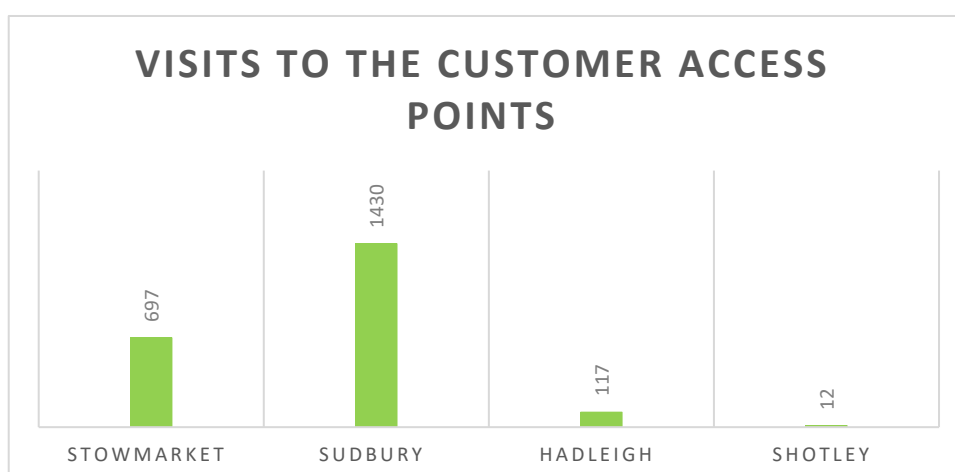
- Telephone support (including telephone appointments, call back options and out of hours emergency call centre support, for evening and weekend emergencies such as raising emergency repairs)
- Face to face support at our customer access points in Stowmarket, Sudbury, Hadleigh and Shotley.
- Social media responses
- Live chat (implemented in August 2023)
- Digital skills sessions (provided through our digital skills officer, as well as promoting the work of community organisations)
- Self-service and online support through our website, chatbot and automated telephone options. As well as online forms and e-mail interactions.

Face to face services:

We provide face to face services at our Customer Access Points, where we provide assisted self-service support for those residents who would prefer to speak to us in person or are digitally excluded.

From April 2023 to January 2024, we have supported 2,256 at our customer access points, the figures have been broken down by location below.

Fig 1. Visits to the customer access points.



Our data shows from the attendees to our customer access points:

- **71%** have attended before and the top reasons for attendance are to access support with scanning documents or completing forms, Council Tax and benefits enquiries, gateway to homechoice enquiries and general housing enquiries.
- The average time a customer spends with us is around **13 minutes**.
- **60%** of customers attend as they do not have access to a device, or they do not feel confident online.

In Mid Suffolk specifically we have seen a reduction in customers accessing support over the last few years and we are keen to explore how we may best work with our customers provide greater visibility, particularly in Mid Suffolk, as per the new Mid Suffolk plan. Over 2024, we will work with Councillors and customers to review options as to how we can achieve this objective.

Digital skills support:

To complement our in person offer and given many of our customers attending the customer access points do not have access to a device or do not feel confident, we also provide digital skills support services across Babergh and Mid Suffolk.

We commenced sessions in **3** sheltered schemes and deliver across Stowmarket, Stradbroke, Hadleigh, Sudbury, and Holbrook and **65** customers have accessed support this year.

We also support communities together East Anglia with their Communita workshops and commenced the Suffolk wide operational group to help map digital skills provision across Suffolk and work collectively to reduce duplication.

A customer provided the following feedback after receiving support at a one to one digital skills sessions:

“Thank you SO MUCH for all your help at yesterday afternoon’s ‘tutorial’ of my smartphone. I came away feeling positively optimistic, not a feeling I have experienced much since I bought it. Using the Samsung Health app you found was there for me already, I counted my steps back home, it told me how many calories I had burned during this, exertion and the distance. I played around with it late yesterday and this morning getting it to identify plants in my garden even though I knew what most of them were.”

We have also created a video to help demonstrate the impact of the digital skills services we provide, to help residents understand the support that is on offer. We have recently worked with our communications team to create information videos about digital skills sessions, to help promote these sessions.

Babergh’s digital skills video: <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1074050890544831>

Mid Suffolk’s digital skills video: <https://www.facebook.com/reel/7208622939228477>

Telephone services:

We provide telephone services for customers and over April 2023 to January 2024, we have seen 109,132 calls into our service, alongside approx. 33,000 outbound calls to customers.

In the last year our customers experienced an average wait time of 2 minutes and 28 seconds. Whilst this is above our target levels of 1 minute and 45 seconds, it does mark a considerable improvement from 4 mins 36 seconds in the previous year. For context the average wait time is the average time a customer is waiting in a call queue (once they have selected an option) to the call being answered by an officer.

The challenges which contributed towards poorer performance for our average telephone wait times was a higher level of staff attrition on the last few years. Many of which left to undertake other roles within the Council.

Alongside this, we found that with a higher level of vacancies to fill, the recruitment process has taken longer. Also, as many of the staff have left to undertake secondment roles in the Council, in turn, we have advertised for temporary roles, which has impacted the level of interest in the vacancies.

To try and alleviate some of these concerns, we recruited three apprentices, to ensure there are enhanced opportunities for progression within the team. We are shortly commencing some process improvement work with our apprentices to review many of the services we provide to ensure we are removing any unnecessary duplication or pain points within the processes to help drive customer satisfaction.

We are aware that call wait times are a priority for our residents and we are working to reduce those now we have nearly recruited a full complement of staff, with the final few positions starting over the next month. So far, this year, our average wait time in January was 1 minute 50 seconds and February was 1 minute and 23 seconds. We are keen to continuously improve our wait times and will be monitoring and reporting our performance to ensure there is appropriate oversight and ensure we are meeting the objectives of our new Mid Suffolk and Babergh plans.

We operate an automated telephone satisfaction survey, of the customers who completed this at the end of the call 70% of customers said they were either very satisfied or satisfied with our services.

Some of the compliments left for the service were as follows:

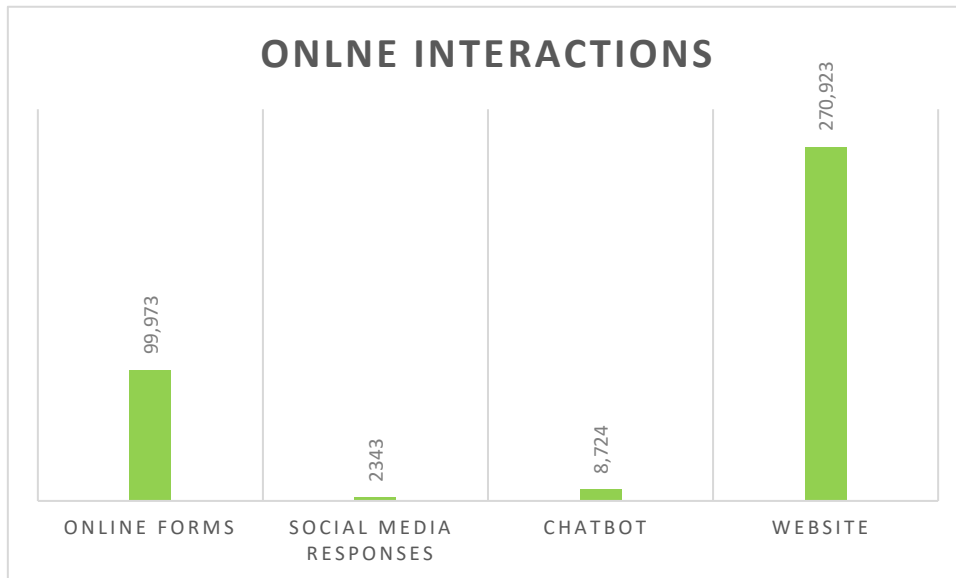
- *Thank you for all the hard work and dedication you put in daily, me and my son appreciate the lengths you go too.*
- *Pass on our thanks for his help on making a very difficult time easier he has been brilliant!*
- *Just wanted to thank customer services, for wonderful help. Absolutely marvellous lady. Sorted my problem out.*

Lastly, we do have automated telephone services and in September a new automated missed collection line was created to support residents who did not want to speak to an officer and allows customers to report issues at a convenient time for them. Over the last year **3,019** interactions have been registered on the automated telephone service line, with the majority related to waste and environmental services.

Online services

There are different online and automated options available for residents who would prefer to interact us with digitally. The ways in which residents can interact with us online include through the new Councils websites, online forms, chatbot, live chat and social media. From April 2023 to January 2024, we have seen the following online interactions.

Fig 2: online customer interactions between April 2023 to January 2024



Over 2024 we will be transitioning our online forms to our new digital platform, and we will be working collaboratively with services and customers to review and redesign our forms to ensure they are intuitive and easy to use.

New services delivered in the last year:

Since August 2023 we have implemented **live chat** services on our website, as a complementary offer alongside our chatbot functions. Since implementing live chat **858** customers have used this service.

In August 2023 we also introduced a call back option on our general services line, so if customers didn't want to wait in a queue, they were able to select this service and we call them back. Since launching this service 327 customer have selected this option and we will be rolling this service out across Council Tax, benefits, and housing rents and our housing line over the next 6 months.

Lastly, in October 2023, we implemented our new Council websites. When creating the sites, we worked with over 50 officers across the Councils to review and refresh the current content to improve the information presented and make it clearer for residents. We continue to make iterative changes, based on customer feedback, with one customer noting:

“I think that is a lot neater and simpler and still very accessible. What a pleasure it is to engage with someone that is responsive to ideas. I don't expect you to adopt all that I say, but to explain what you are doing and even make some changes... well that's so refreshing these days. Well done.”

Before the launch of our new sites, we also worked with ACE Anglia an advocacy organisation working with people with learning disabilities and autistic people across Suffolk. With the support of ACE, we undertook a testing workshop to gain feedback and make further changes ahead of the launch.

Whilst many changes have taken place, we appreciate that the website will always require iterative change and improvement to ensure that our customers expectations are met. We will shortly be commencing work to review the PDF's that are located on our website (PDF's are usually policies and guidance for example) to ensure these are accessible for our residents. We are also exploring different ways to present the information, including the use of easy read documents to ensure that are website is inclusive for residents and we would be keen to share progress on this as we continue develop our plans over this year.

Fig 3: Session at ACE Anglia to test the websites.



Complaints

Between the 1st of April 2023 and the 31st of December 2023, the Councils received 770 stage one complaints. This represents a 30% increase when compared 2022. Our largest volume of complaints received during this time are as follows:

- Building Services: 314 an increase of 88 (38.9%) from 226 between the same period in 22.
- Asset Compliance: 136 an increase of 55 (67.9%) from 81.
- Tenancy Services: 48 an increase of 22 (84.6%) from 26.
- Waste Services: 42 an increase of 10 (31.3%) from 32.
- Housing Solutions: 37 an increase of 5 from 32 (15%)

Stage 2 complaints have also increased to 117 (from 76 in 2022), this is largely due to the increase in stage 1 complaints received. The breakdown of stage 2 complaints shows that 75% relate to housing, 9% planning enforcement, 6% planning and 6% public realm.

Often our complaints are related to delays in undertaking repairs work, insufficient communication of next steps as well as multiple visits required to remedy an issue. In the last year, several changes have taken place such as changes in contractors, a new damp and mould contractor appointed to ensure that inspection work can be carried out more quickly and in late 2023 housing appointed a resolutions coordinator, to help review initial complaints and resolve them more quickly for tenants.

Stage two complaints are often escalated when the tenant is unhappy that works or repairs have not been completed or scheduled following their stage one complaint. It is hoped that the new housing resolutions coordinator role will help have a positive impact on the number of stage two complaints received.

In February and March 2024 all officers who handle complaints are undertaking refresher training with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman to help continuously improve the quality of responses we provide to customers. Alongside this, we are also implementing a new complaints system over the early part of this year, which is being developed as part of our digital platform project which will provide a more seamless digital experience for our customers and allow for reporting at District level for complaints.

Compliments

Between the 1st of April and 31st December, the Councils received 152 compliments.

The three most common areas for compliments were:

- Building Services
- Planning and Planning Enforcement
- Customer Services

A sample of compliments can be viewed below:

“I would like to leave a compliment for the plumber who came to fix the leak in the bathroom, he was absolutely brilliant and want him again if there are anymore leaks”.

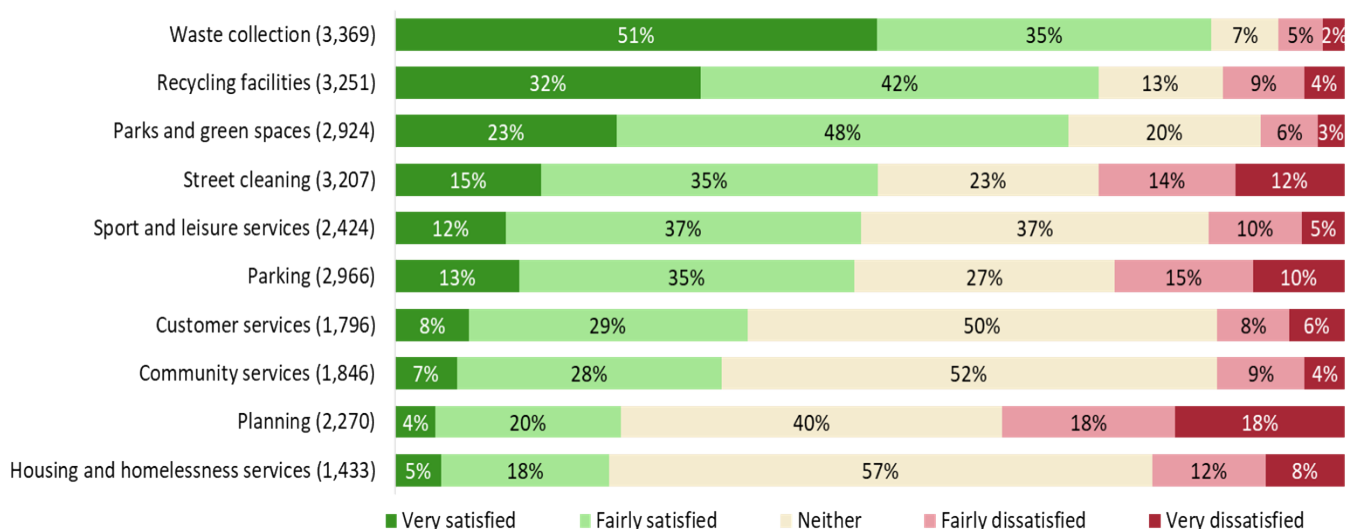
“I just want to take the time to thank you for all your amazing help in getting my debts sorted, my housing situation and constant communication with me. Without you I know I'd be homeless, and my disability would get a lot worse.”

“I just wanted to say a big thank you for getting the decision over the line last week and for your helpful advice during the application process. I also thought your committee presentation was excellent and provided clear and informative guidance through the key issues relevant to the planning assessment. We now look forward to discharging relevant conditions and commencing with the development of a high-quality housing scheme.”

We strive to use customer insight and feedback to improve our services and over the next year we will be looking to undertake both an internal and external customer satisfaction survey with the institute of customer services, to benchmark our satisfaction across other Councils and organisations.

The internal customer survey will measure our customer culture across the organisation to ensure we are embedding an ethos that customer services is the role of everyone across the Council and our external survey will provide us with the opportunity to explore the key drivers of customer satisfaction. We will use the results to understand more about how we can drive actionable insights from the residents survey results. For context, I have added some of the areas of focus we are particularly keen to improve, below.

Fig 4: Residents survey satisfaction with services:



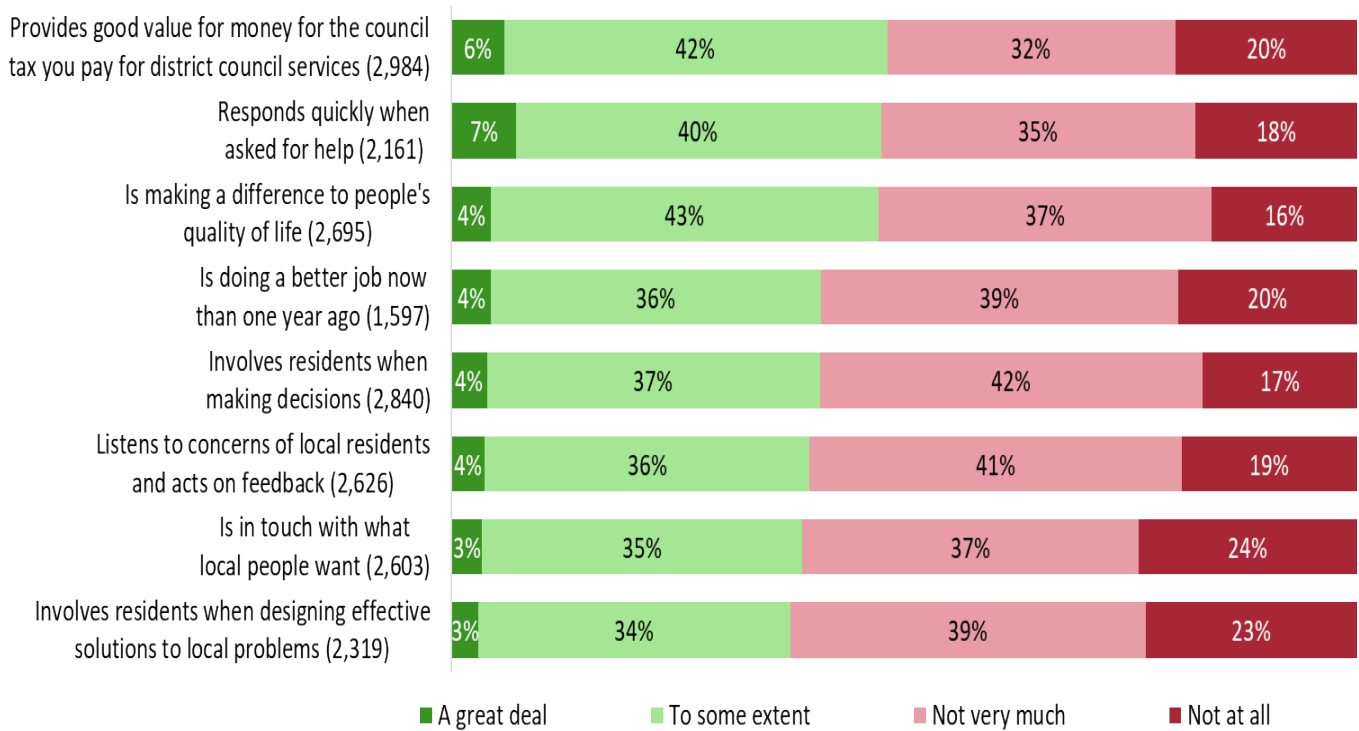
The above shows that only 37% of residents surveyed were satisfied with customer services. This shows a 2% decrease from the previous year. We can also see that 6% are very dissatisfied with

the services we provide. It is important to be able to respond and act on this, we undertake more granular analysis to help us to improve.

Throughout this process we are keen to explore how to involve customers within this action plan, as we understand that many people do not feel the Council involve residents in decision making. This was another key area for improvement from the residents survey. Therefore, once we have understood the areas of concern more closely, we will look to ensure we involve residents in our improvement plans to ensure we are delivering services that meet their needs.

Lastly, we will seek to understand how we can support residents to feel more satisfied that we respond quickly when they ask for help. We propose to bring back our findings from the survey and insight work to a future overview and scrutiny, to help develop and scrutinise our plans.

Fig 5: Resident survey findings regarding the view of their local Council.



Overall, we hope this report demonstrated the changes that have been made over the last year and provides some insight into our proposed areas for improvement, considering the new plans agreed at Full Council in January and taking account of the resident survey findings.