ABSTRACT: This report outlines the proposed revised arrangements for telephone contact in respect of ACCESS Angus.

1. RECOMMENDATION(S)

It is recommended that the Committee:-

(i) agree that telephone contact to ACCESS offices be directed to ACCESSLine, as outlined in paragraph 3.1 of this report; and

(ii) agree that the ACCESSLine (0845) number be retained, as contained in paragraph 3.2 of this report.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 ACCESS Angus Telephone Contact

2.1.1 Essentially ACCESS offices are the face-to-face contact points for customers and ACCESSLine is the point of contact for telephone enquiries. ACCESS offices currently experience conflicting demands in dealing with customers face-to-face and by telephone. If all staff are dealing with customers in the office then the telephone will go unanswered. Comments and complaints have been received by customers in this regard.

2.1.2 One of the conclusions of the ACCESS Review of September 2007 was that the introduction of a more flexible approach to dealing with telephone calls would be advantageous. It was "therefore recommended that an improved communications and telephony be introduced that would automatically re-route telephone calls from an ACCESS office to ACCESSLine".

2.1.3 More recently, one of the priorities identified in the Customer Services Strategy is "to develop a plan for the channels the Council will use to deliver services to, and interact with, customers and direct customers to the most appropriate and cost effective channel options. This will involve making best use of technology to deliver more modern and responsive services which will provide benefits for both customers and the Council."

2.1.4 A small number of large Council sites have telephone systems with some degree of integration. These are sites which include Orchardbank Campus, County Buildings, Bruce House, Dewar House and a few other offices where extensions can transfer calls to other extensions and can call other extensions directly. However, most Council sites, including the ACCESS offices, have separate independent telephone systems. This makes transferring calls between sites impossible and also means that calls between those sites have to cross the BT telephone network thus incurring costs.

2.1.5 It was agreed to move to a single managed telephone system for the ACCESS offices facilitated by the introduction of Voice over IP, which in addition to providing enhanced operational capability, will also resolve the issues outlined in paragraph 2.1.4 above. The cost of the new infrastructure was part funded by the Council’s Modernising Government Fund (MGF3) allocation.
2.2 **ACCESSLine Telephone Number**

2.2.1 The Council adopted the 0845 number in 1999 primarily to address the issue of Angus Council’s telephony services being delivered from a central location and partly to have an easily remembered number available for its customers.

2.2.2 At that time, these numbers were operated by BT and, until 2004, were charged at the same rate as local calls. However, call charges now vary depending on service providers and if not from a BT landline calls will always cost more. The standard phrase on advertising is “Calls from a BT landline cost £xx, calls from other networks may vary and calls from a mobile may be considerably higher”.

2.2.3 Two FOI requests and two customer complaints to ACCESSLine have been received over the past year regarding the charge associated with the 0845 number and, more recently, an MSP enquiry.

3. **PROPOSALS**

3.1 **ACCESS Angus Telephone Contact**

3.1.1 The implementation of the new telephony system provides the opportunity to progress with paragraphs 2.1.2 and 2.1.3 and especially as ACCESS offices and ACCESSLine are now a single business unit within Neighbourhood Service. This will also provide a more efficient and effective use of staff resources in the ACCESS business unit. As well as promoting ACCESSLine as the number to contact the Council, a more responsive customer service will be provided. If all lines are busy in ACCESSLine there is an automatic facility to leave a message and the customer contact time is extended as ACCESSLine is open 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m., Monday to Friday. Also, outwith office hours, callers will access the OOHS messaging service which will automatically direct callers to officers on call, for example to homelessness and emergency housing repairs services.

3.1.2 Also, a high volume of telephone enquiries to ACCESS offices relate to housing repairs and, with the integration of CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system with Northgate Housing Repairs in September 2010, ACCESSLine can now process housing repairs at first point of contact. This increase in telephone contact to ACCESSLine will be contained within existing resources.

3.1.3 The infrastructure for the single managed telephone system for ACCESS will be operational by summer 2011 and the transition of ACCESS office telephone contact to ACCESSLine will be achieved as follows:–

   a) Implementation on a phased basis from summer 2011 to 31 March 2012;

   b) The new telephony system has the facility to redirect calls from ACCESS offices to ACCESSLine;

   c) Replace the ACCESS office telephone numbers with the ACCESSLine number in Council publications/correspondence; and

   d) Direct communication to inform, in particular, Council tenants.

3.2 **ACCESSLine Telephone Number**

3.2.1 Whilst it is a minority of customers that have enquired/complained about the 0845 tariff, we should still look at how the service can be improved as a result of these. Also, from an equalities perspective, consideration does need to be given to the cost of accessing the service. The options are:–

   a) Move to an 0800 freephone number. The Council would pick up the cost of the call for the caller. It is not free for customers calling from a mobile;

   b) Move to an 03 number, launched by BT in 2008 for public bodies. There is a per call cost to the Council, as the receiver. BT has advised that customers calling an 03 number from a BT landline would be charged the national call cost;
c) Retain the 0845 number. The caller picks up the cost although call charges vary depending on the service provider. BT abolished call fees to 0845 numbers and now charge their customers just slightly more than the local rate.

3.2.2 The preferred option would be to retain the 0845 number particularly as it is now a well known and publicised number. Also, as outlined in paragraph 2.2.2, call charges vary depending on service providers and the call packages that they offer are continually changing.

4 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report. As stated in paragraph 2.1.5 the cost of the new infrastructure was part funded by the Council’s Modernising Government Fund (MGF3) allocation.

5 HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no human rights implications arising from this report.

6. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The issues dealt with in this report have been the subject of consideration from an equalities perspective. An equalities impact assessment has been undertaken.

7. CONSULTATION

7.1 The Chief Executive, Director of Corporate Services, Head of Finance, Head of Law and Administration, Head of Information Technology and the Chair of the Customer Services Programme Board have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

8 CONCLUSION

8.1 These arrangements will provide a more efficient and effective use of staff resources and technology in the ACCESS Business Unit as well as providing a more joined-up service, all of which will create benefits for both customers and the Council. This will also contribute to one of the priorities of the Customer Services Strategy.

RON ASHTON
DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

NOTE: No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to a material extent in preparing the above report.

ACCESS/NS/AN/CP