

Mystery Shopping – Wave 18 Report

Housing Register and Advice

Introduction

In late spring 2019 the head of housing solutions was approached about having their service mystery shopped by the resident involvement team. The operational manager subsequently met with the senior resident involvement officer to discuss the exercise. Six scenarios were developed that covered all aspects of the housing register service. The main aim was to test officer's knowledge of their service area, whether they were able to give out the correct information in response to a general enquiry, to flag up any gaps in service delivery and to identify any staff training needs.

Summary of findings

The results for general call handling were very positive, with staff handling customers politely and dealing with the enquiry quickly and efficiently in 95% of the shops. Staff were clear and confident in speaking to customers who, as a result, felt valued by the officers in 94% of calls. No use of jargon was reported and only 5% of calls were transferred. Shoppers reported that staff appeared knowledgeable about the subjects outlined in the scenarios and did their best to answer the enquiry in 88% of calls. However, although officers said 'hello/good morning/afternoon on 89% of calls, they only said 'Croydon council' and gave their department name in 58% of calls and 'How can I help' and their name in 53% of calls. Mystery shoppers reported rushed and unclear greetings as the call was answered, not hearing the name of the officer and having to ask the officer to repeat their name during or at the end of the call. Based on how callers were treated 58% felt very confident to call the council again, 32% felt fairly confident and 10% not very confident.

Mystery shoppers generally felt that officers did not give full answers or signpost callers to information on the website. In terms of answering the set scenarios against the model answers, only 36%, of points were fully met, with 20% partially met and 44% not met.

Managers comments:

This has been a useful exercise which has identified both good practices and areas of weakness. The contents of the report will be discussed with the team and the actions detailed later will be implemented as soon as possible so as to improve service delivery. Experience indicates the team's written communications are of a more detailed nature and our verbal contacts need to mirror the good advice being given to our customers.

Methodology

Scenarios and model answers for the mystery shopping exercise were developed by the operations manager. The resident involvement team have an existing pool of resident mystery shoppers who they call upon at various times to execute the exercises. This group of residents was contacted in early June 2019, advised of the pending exercise and invited to participate. In total 11 mystery shoppers expressed an initial interest in being involved in the current exercise and were invited to attend a briefing session on 26 June 2019 at the council offices at Bernard Weatherill House. Five resident mystery shoppers attended the briefing session. Other mystery shoppers who were unable to attend the briefing session were later briefed and given all of the necessary information. Two officers from the resident involvement team also carried out mystery shops in order to supplement the exercise.

At the briefing session mystery shoppers were given an introduction to the housing register service by the operational manager as well as a full explanation of how to conduct and record the exercise. They also had an opportunity to practice making a phone call, to ask questions and to seek clarification on any unclear aspects. They were each given a pack containing all of the relevant forms and the 6 scenarios, as well as instructions on how to complete the forms. It was agreed that mystery shoppers would start to conduct their shops at the beginning of July and conduct them over a period of several weeks.

Mystery shoppers were asked to record their findings on the service they received from the officer answering the phone based on how quickly the phone was answered, how they were greeted by the officer, whether the officer was courteous or rude, used language or jargon that they did not understand, whether the call was transferred, etc. Mystery shoppers were given model answers to each scenario and asked to check how the officer responded against these answers. They were advised that the forms were to be completed during the call or as soon as possible afterwards. Mystery shoppers were asked to complete as many shops as they felt able to, and to try to make the calls at various times throughout the day.

In total, 19 shops were carried out initially between 1 July and 12 August. Additional shops were conducted during October 2019. All shops were conducted during contact centre opening hours of 9am and 4pm. The six scenarios were tested over a variety of dates and times by residents and officers as follows:

Table 1.

Scenario	Number completed
S1 Extra bedroom	3
S2 Downsizing	4
S3 Move to coast	4
S4 Council flat	5

S5 Move to Croydon	1
S6 Sheltered	2
Total	19

NB On or around the 9 August 2019 the Operational manager advised that members of the Housing Register team had become aware that they were being mystery shopped due to the repeated calls from one particular mystery shopper leading, to staff being able to recognise the shopper's voice. These were some of the last shops carried out by our resident mystery shoppers and as such the majority of calls had already been completed. Subsequent shops were carried out by members of the resident involvement team after waiting for a number of weeks, despite knowing they were being shopped, officers failed to give out full information as outlined in the model answers.

The Details

Scenario 1 – Extra bedroom

'My wife and I are tenants of a housing association property in South Croydon. It's a nice two bedroom house but my wife is expecting our third child soon and we need an extra bedroom. Can you tell me what my options are?'

Model Answer:

Officer should mention mutual exchange and provide details of website to register for a swap (www.homeswapper.co.uk). Officer should also highlight the importance of giving a positive description of the property in the advert and take pictures that show off the property to its best.

Officer should also explain and provide details for Housing Moves. Housing Moves is the Mayor of London's housing mobility scheme that allows tenants of London boroughs or housing associations to move outside their existing borough to a different part of London. Application can be made by visiting www.london.gov.uk and searching Housing Moves.

Officer should advise that under the Council's housing allocation scheme (aka Allocation Policy) that households who are lacking one bedroom would not meet the threshold to join the housing register.

Details of rented alternative accommodation in the private rented sector and applying for a discretionary housing payment for help with a deposit and/or rent in advance may also be given.

KEY POINTS	FULLY		PART		NOT	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Mutual exchange/Homeswapper details	0		1	33%	2	67%
Positive advert of property	0		0		3	100%
Housing moves	1	33%	0		2	67%
Housing allocations policy	0		2	67%	1	33%
Details of private rented accommodation	0		0		3	100%
Discretionary payment	0		0		3	100%

Other notes: 3 shops

- Gave me lots of information but maybe should have gone into more detail
- I was told nothing could be done until the baby was born, then birth certificate needed to be submitted to tenancy officer (I did say housing association) They could then make an application to move, but it would take “a very long time.” Until the child was 4 years old, they wouldn’t be likely to get anything because a baby or toddler wouldn’t give them enough points to have priority. I was also told that a one bedroom shortage was not enough: a lack of two bedrooms or more was the minimum to join the housing register. No mention of Housing Moves, mutual exchange or private rental.

Responses

There were 3 shops of this scenario. The results of the shops show that officers failed to mention key aspects related to answering this query. Mutual exchange and Homeswapper details were only mentioned in one of the three shops (33%). There was no mention to shoppers that they should take photographs that show off the property in its best light. Two of the three shoppers were never told about Housing Moves. However, officers were able to give partial information relating to the Council’s allocation policy (67%). Officers also failed to give callers any information regarding renting in the private sector or the availability of discretionary payments to assist with deposits or advance rent payments.

Management’s comments/action

It is unfortunate that full advice on the available options was not provided. Having reviewed a number of the team’s written communications in response to similar enquiries, advice and assistance that mirrors that of the model answer is typically provided. As an action the team’s manager will request that staff give the same,

comprehensive, advice that is provided in our written communications when responding to telephone enquiries. This will be actioned in the next team meeting.

Scenario 2 – Downsizing

‘I’m living in a three bedroom council house but as I’m getting on a bit, I’m finding it hard to manage with the stairs and looking after the garden. I would really like to move to a smaller property with no stairs. Can the Council help me with this?’

Model answer:

Officer should explain that as a tenant who is downsizing to a smaller property, they will be awarded the highest priority in recognition that they are giving up family sized/larger accommodation. Officer should also advise that under the Council’s downsizing incentive scheme that the Council will pay £2000 for every bedroom given up. For example, a tenant who moves from a three bedroom property to a one bedroom property would receive £4000. Assistance with removal costs will also be provided if the tenant uses one of the Council’s approved removal firms.

Details of how to register for a transfer should be provided. The application form can be completed online on the Council’s website (www.croydon.gov.uk) and clicking in ‘Apply For It’. The officer can also offer to send out paper forms.

KEY POINTS	FULLY		PART		NOT	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Given highest priority	0		2	50%	2	50%
£2000 for every room vacated	0		0		4	100%
Assistance with removal costs			0		4	100%
How to register for a transfer	1	25%	3	75%	0	
Online application	2	50%	2	50%	0	
Paper forms offered	1	25%	0		3	75%

Other notes: 4 shops

- Arrange for a transfer, log on to website/housing transfer form/choose the areas on form/qualify for sheltered property
- Stopped me before I could explain my situation properly (they only heard ‘I’m in a 3 bed). Then I was told to go online and look for a housing transfer application form. Operator also spoke too fast and rushed to get me off the phone. I had to prompt for other information.

- When I was put through to x she apologised that she was just about to go into a meeting. She offered to call me back and when I declined she gave me her number and extension. She said the forms were online, or I could pop in or she could send them out, or she could visit me. This didn't seem like a fair assessment because she didn't have the time to talk to me at length. Her manner and many options for follow up made me think she would have given me extensive information in other circumstances,

Responses

There were 4 shops of this scenario. Many of the key points in the model answer were not fully covered. Half of the callers who used this scenario only received partial information about being granted high priority for downsizing, while the others were not told at all. None of the callers were told that they would receive an incentive of £2000 for each room that they gave up or about assistance with removal costs. Paper forms were not offered to three of the four callers.

Only 25% of callers received full information relating to applying for a transfer, the remainder only received partial information about this. Officers were better at signposting callers to online applications.

Management's comments/action

The demand for larger, family sized, accommodation is very high and it is important that any opportunity to bring back one of these properties is not missed. The importance of this will be explained to the team along with highlighting that the tenants (typically older persons) contacting us for advice may prefer to complete paper forms rather than online. Whilst the completion of a paper form is contrary to the Council's preferred application method, each approach should be considered on a case by case basis. As per earlier comments, this will be addressed with the team in the next team meeting.

Scenario 3 – Moving to the coast

'My parents are tenants of Croydon council and have just retired. A lot of their friends have moved to the South coast and they are keen to move there too. Are there any schemes to help with this?'

Model answers:

Details of the Seaside and Country Homes scheme should be provided and explained. This scheme offers older council or housing association tenants in London the opportunity to move away from the hustle and bustle of the city to more rural locations or by the coast. To be eligible, at least one of the applicants must be over the age of 60. Applications can be made by visiting www.london.gov.uk and searching Seaside and Country Homes.

KEY POINTS	FULLY		PART		NOT	
Details of Seaside and Country Homes given	3	75%	1	75%		
Eligibility criteria	1	25%	1	25%	2	50%
Applications online	3	75%	1	25%		
Other notes: 4 shops <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Didn't give age restriction. Staff member didn't explain the application process fully, but did explain ways of finding the application. Staff member didn't seem as helpful/friendly when I didn't want to give my parent's details. Slightly rushed to get me off the phone. • She told me that there was a scheme called Seaside and Country Homes, but didn't expand. She didn't mention age or eligibility (however, I had – per scenario – already told her they were retired). She told me that I could apply directly on the website (but didn't specify London.gov.uk, so I would have assumed it was Croydon council's) She said that there was a significant waiting list, especially for popular areas. She suggested an alternative might be to consider a mutual swap. • Rehousing team. Homefinder UK. Can do housing transfer form on paper, if needed. Can send forms to current address. Homeswapper, Housing Moves, Mayor of London. All on website. 						

Responses

There were 4 shops of this scenario. Officers were more proficient at giving out the relevant information to callers for this scenario. 75% of callers received full information with the other 25% getting partial details of the Seaside and Country Homes scheme. 75% of callers were directed to the online application process. However, only one of the 4 callers was given full information including the age restriction and the specific website to visit in order to make an application which is important as callers may assume that this could be done on Croydon council's website. Half of the callers who tested this scenario were not told the eligibility criteria.

Management's comments/actions

As with scenario one, it is unfortunate to read that the advice that is typically provided in written communications was not provided. There is confidence that the team know the correct information to give customers and the importance of giving comprehensive advice will be highlighted with the team.

Scenario 4 – Getting a council flat

'I'm living in a shared house at the moment but even though I'm working full-time I can't afford to rent my own place. Have I got any chance of getting a Council flat?'

Model answer:

The Council currently operates a single person's worker scheme that gives priority to single applicants or couples who are living in shared accommodation and have been working full-time (16+ hours per week) for at least 2 years. Applicants who meet the criteria are awarded a band 2 priority and can bid for accommodation via the Council Choice Based Lettings Scheme – Croychoice. The caller should be advised to submit an application via the Council's website – www.croydon.gov.uk and clicking 'Apply For It'. Caller should also be advised that it may be some time before a property becomes available.

KEY POINTS	FULLY		PART		NOT	
Details of single person's workers scheme given	1	20%	2	40%	2	40%
Eligibility criteria	3	60%	0		2	40%
CroydonChoice details given (1 blank)	1	25%	0		3	75%
Advised to submit application via website	4	80%	1	20%	0	
Advised of wait time for available properties	4	80%	1	20%	0	

Other notes: 5 shops

- Advised to complete housing application form on the council's website as not yet a tenant. Did not offer to give me the website address
- The staff member asked me questions to double check that I would be eligible to apply before going on the website myself. The operator also went into the website while I was on the phone to check the information and that all the information that I needed would be available to me. Very helpful, friendly and honest about the waiting times for properties. She also told me what to do if my circumstances changed.

- I wasn't told the name or details, of the scheme, nor the eligibility criteria. I was advised to apply online and told that there could be a very long waiting time.

Responses

There were 5 shops of this scenario, making it the most shopped. Only one of the five callers (20%) received full details of the single person's working scheme with the other 4 callers receiving either partial or no details. Officers were better able to impart information regarding the eligibility criteria, giving 60% of callers full information on the scheme. The remaining callers were not told about who was eligible to apply to the scheme. In 75% of calls, officers did not tell callers about CroydonChoice. On a more positive note, 80% of callers were advised to submit online applications and that the waiting time would be lengthy.

Management's comments/action

It is positive to read that in the majority of cases that efforts to manage customers' expectations were made. A large number of the enquiries the team receive relate waiting time and by giving information at the first point of contact should reduce the number of enquiries in the future.

In respect of the failings, the team will be reminded of this scheme and the importance of giving full information on the options available to this customer group.

Scenario 5 – Moving to Croydon

'I'm living in private rented accommodation in Crawley at the moment but would really like to move to Croydon to be near friends. I was told by someone at work that you probably won't help because I don't have a local connection. I lived in Croydon for 15 years before moving to Crawley 3 years ago and I don't think this is right.'

Model answer:

Officer should explain that under the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme (aka Allocations Policy) an applicant must be currently residing in the borough and have

done so for at least three years to be eligible to join the register. Caller should be advised to consider renting alternative accommodation in the private rented sector should they wish to move to the borough.

KEY POINTS	FULLY		PART		NOT	
Details council allocations policy	1	100%				
Eligibility criteria given	1	100%				
Consider private rented accommodation	1	100%				
Other notes: 1 shop						
No comments						

Responses

There was only one shop of this scenario. The officer gave full information to the caller.

Management's comments/action

The Housing Allocations Scheme's local connection criteria is very clear and is often referred to. It is pleasing to see that this scenario was responded to fully.

Scenario 6 – Sheltered Housing in Croydon

“My mum is in her eighties and lives in sheltered housing in Kent. My wife and I would really like her to be a lot closer to us so that we help her with shopping and can get to her quickly if she has a fall. Can she be considered for sheltered housing in Croydon?”

Model answers:

Officer should explain that as she is currently living outside of the Borough that she would not normally be considered for housing, however, as she is eligible for sheltered housing we can consider her for properties that are in lower demand.

Officer should explain that a housing register application form and sheltered housing

assessment form can be completed online on the Council's website (www.croydon.gov.uk) and clicking on 'Apply for It'. Offer to send paper forms.

KEY POINTS	FULLY		PART		NOT	
	1	50%			1	50%
Not normally considered because out of borough	1	50%			1	50%
Eligible for sheltered housing in lower demand properties	1	50%			1	50%
Complete forms online – Apply for it	1	50%	1	50%		
Offer to send paper forms	1	50%	1	50%		
Other notes: 2 shops <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Info given – housing transfer and sheltered application both online, then would have to give up tenancy. No more info given from model answer. 						

Responses

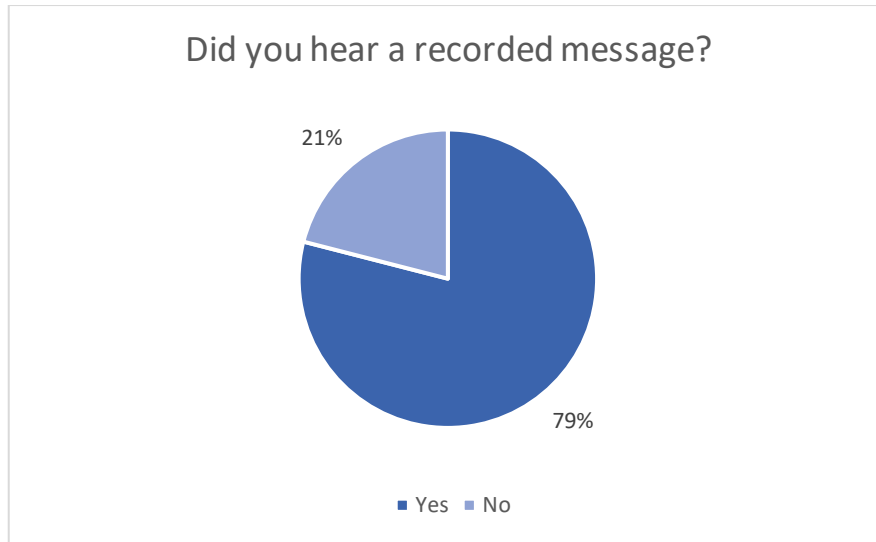
There were 2 shops of this scenario. Callers received full information in line with the model answer only half of the time, with officers not imparting information regarding sheltered housing or online applications to the other 50% of callers. Additionally, officers only offered to send out paper application forms to half of the callers.

Management comments/action

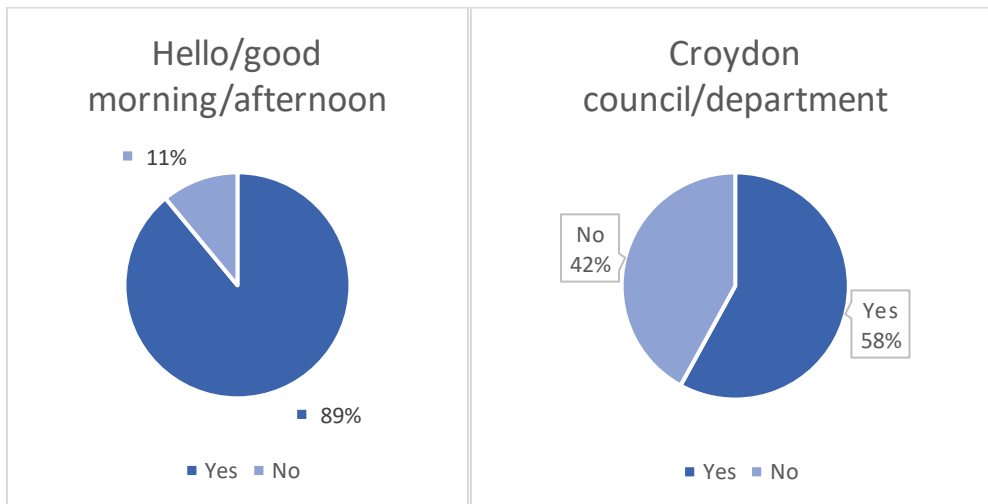
This scenario is relatively uncommon which may have resulted in the mixed advice being given. That being said, it is important that the advice given is consistent across the team. The team will be reminded of how requests for sheltered accommodation from households outside the Borough should be treated to ensure that accurate information is provided in all cases.

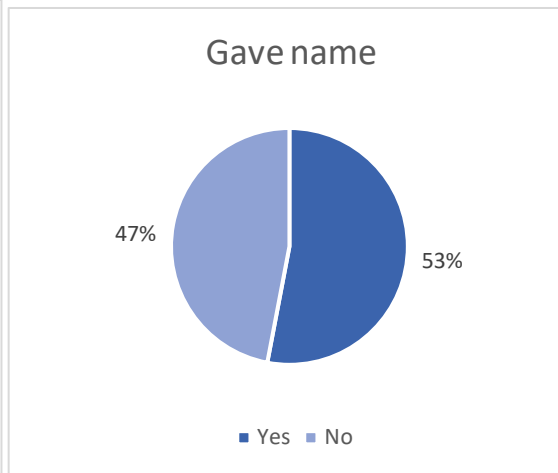
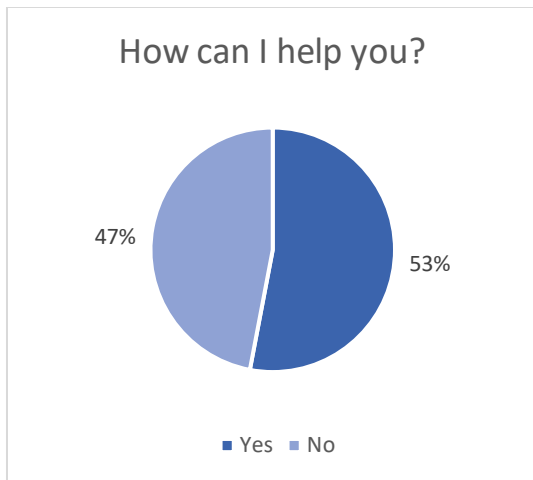
CUSTOMER SERVICE GRAPHS

DID YOU HEAR A RECORDED MESSAGE?



HOW WERE YOU GREETED BY MEMBER OF STAFF?





Answer choices	Yes	No
a. They said "Hello/good morning/good afternoon"	89%	11%
b. They said "Croydon Council/Departments name"	58%	42%
c. They said "How can I help?"	53%	47%
d. They gave their name	53%	47%

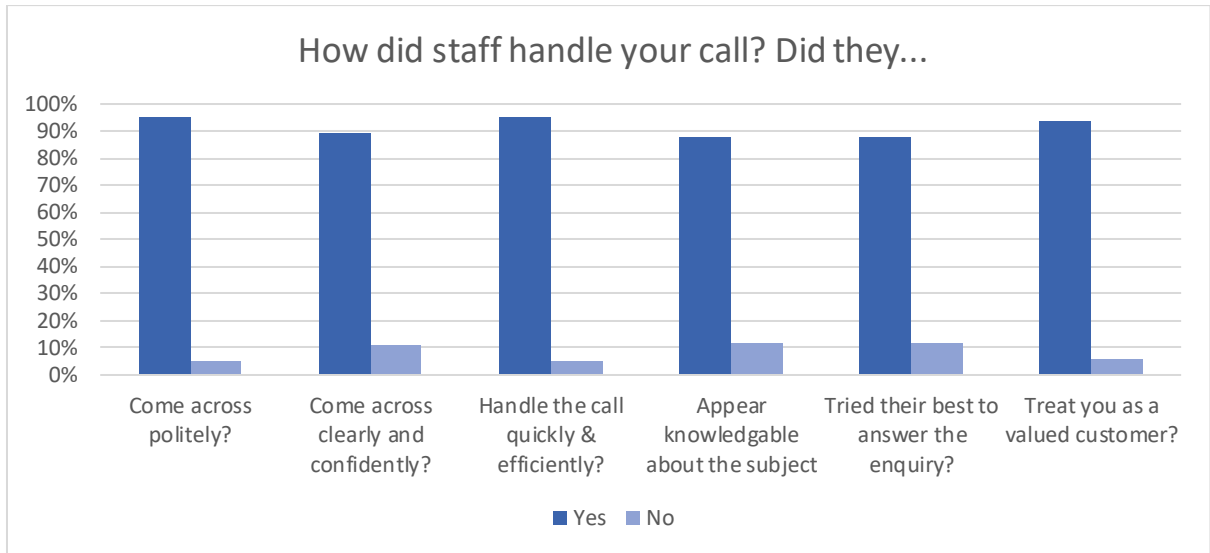
STAFF ASSESSMENT

HOW DO YOU FEEL THE MEMBER OF STAFF HANDLED YOUR QUERY?

Did staff...

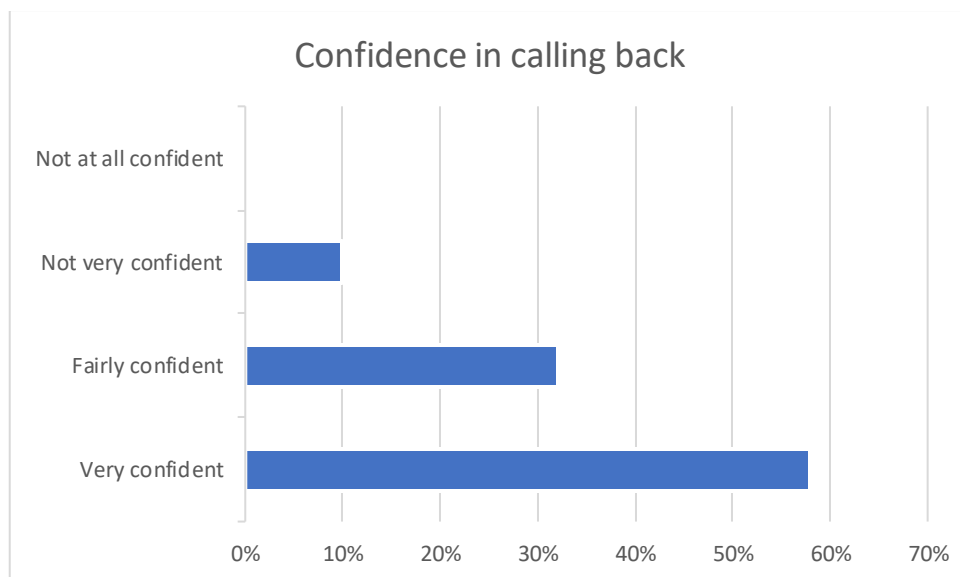
Select Yes or No for each option	Yes	No
a. Come across politely?	95%	5%
b. Come across clearly & confidently?	89%	11%
c. Handle the call quickly & efficiently? 1 blank	95%	5%
d. Appear knowledgeable about the subject? 3 blank	88%	12%
e. Try their best to answer the enquiry? 2 blank	88%	12%
f. Treat you as a valued customer? 3 blank	94%	6%
<p><i>If you answered no to any of the above, please provide more information</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greeting was so rushed that I couldn't hear their name nor whether they said Croydon council or department. I had to ask name at the end. She had to ask her colleague if she was giving the correct information. Other than that she gave basic information. The scenario didn't require that I ask questions to feel valued. However, I didn't feel undervalued. Very strong accent, couldn't make out name. The man who answered my call was pleasant and helpful and as soon as he 		

heard my query, he transferred me to the “dedicated officer for downsizing”. Both officers treated me as a valued customer, but x was not able to go into detail because she was just about to set off for a meeting. But she offered me so many options for follow-up that, as a genuine resident, I would certainly have taken up one of her offers.



Considering the way you were treated during this call and the information given, how confident would you feel calling the council again?

Very confident	Fairly confident	Not very confident	Not at all confident
58%	32%	10%	0%



Any other comments on how the response to your call could have been improved?

- A fuller answer. If I had been a genuine applicant, I wouldn't have realised the other options available so my confidence would have been misplaced.
- Fuller explanation of the scheme. Specifying the website I needed.
- Had to ask for name at end of call as it was not clearly stated at the beginning. More clarity when answering/greeting customers – slower, clearer pace and tone.
- Not sure if the spelling of the name is correct, more clarity needed, suggest spelling their name if the caller is unclear of what they've heard.
- Obviously, it would have been better if the officer had had more time to go into detail. However, they offered several options to enable me to contact them (or vice versa) which would, I felt, have left me fully informed.
- Telling me about CroydonChoice – ideally by name and then explaining how it worked. I was left with the impression that I would simply be applying to go on the housing register with no extra priority so probably wouldn't have considered that it would be worth my applying.

Customer service – Headline results

Positives

- Staff never used jargon or language that the shopper did not understand at any time
- 95% of calls were answered within 5 rings
- 95% of shoppers reported that staff were polite and handled the call quickly and efficiently.
- 94% of shoppers felt they were treated as a valued customer
- Staff said 'Hello/good morning/afternoon' in only 89% of calls
- 89% of shoppers felt that staff came across clearly and confidently
- 88% of shoppers felt that staff appeared knowledgeable about the subject and tried their best to answer the enquiry

Less positive

- Staff members gave their name and asked 'How can I help you?' in only 53% of calls
- Staff said Croydon council and/or their department name only 58% of calls
- 13% of shoppers did not feel that they were treated as a valued customer

Management comments: It is positive to see that in the majority of cases that calls were answered in a polite and professional manner. The team is very busy and it would be easy for standards to slip. The team will be reminded of the Council's corporate standard for call answering with a view to addressing the less positive feedback.

Conclusion: This has been a useful exercise and has highlighted the good advice that the team provide. Failings have been identified which will be addressed with the team with a view to ensuring that consistent advice is given to customers. Whilst failings were identified, there is confidence that officers know the correct information to provide and going forward the information given will be more consistent and complete.