

OnDemand enables Stockport to cope with seasonal call surge

Civica's contact centre boosts Stockport's telephone capacity at the busiest time of the year



Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council has been utilising Civica's OnDemand service for around five years to help with, amongst other things, revenues and benefits back office work. In early 2016, as it prepared to send out annual council tax bills, the Council recognised that its call centre was short staffed and would struggle to cope with the likely increase in phone calls from residents.

So, having already used Civica's highly-trained contact centre staff the previous year to supplement their own resources, Stockport once again called on the OnDemand service to handle overflow calls during the busy council tax billing period.

Annual council tax billing and staff constraints stretched Stockport's contact centre capability

In early 2016, in common with all local authorities, Stockport MBC faced a resource squeeze. A service restructure had resulted in several vacant positions remaining unfilled in Stockport's direct contact centre – Stockport Direct – which handles telephone enquiries from the Borough's residents. Stockport recognised that the looming council tax billing season would significantly affect their ability to handle the associated surge in call volumes. The situation was exacerbated by the Council's effort to boost the uptake of online services by residents that was generating additional phone traffic in the short term.

To avoid residents either being left waiting for long periods for calls to be answered or not getting through at all, the Council needed to boost capacity quickly. However, adding temporary staff would only be helpful if the individuals were experienced in dealing with council tax queries and could adapt quickly to Stockport's specific systems and to the unique characteristics of the Council's residents. Stockport also needed flexibility, as they couldn't predict peaks and troughs in call volumes. This meant the ability to fine-tune the level of resource at short notice to avoid unnecessary expenditure was critical.

The Council recognised that although several companies offer back office cover, providing a telephone service is logistically more difficult. Civica's high-quality call processing services and the existing relationship made the OnDemand service the obvious choice.

"We faced the confluence of moving residents online, a number of vacancies and the busiest time of the year. So coming up to peak time around annual billing we knew we would be short-staffed."

Sharon Basing
Team Manager, Stockport Direct.



Highly trained OnDemand staff delivered top quality customer service

The first step was a thorough scoping exercise followed by two days of training to familiarise Civica staff with the Council's procedures and paperwork. Data protection issues were also addressed – both in terms of ensuring that Civica's contact centre was compliant and also that Civica staff had been through the Council's online training. Sharon points out that: "Council regulations are very specific about the outside contractors we can hire – they're very strict." Overall, Sharon appreciated the preparatory work: "All councils are different so it was good that Civica took time to get to know the specifics of how we work."

Civica provided three council tax staff based in the company's contact centre at the secure, ISO 27001 and PSN compliant Worcestershire Hub to provide cover during the predicted peak in calls during March and April. Three lines were available as an overflow service for council tax calls, with an answer phone facility on a fourth line when all staff were busy.

Sharon stresses that Civica personnel were carrying out the same tasks as her in-house staff. "They were answering the calls and entering data directly into the Stockport system. But they were also entering notes of customer conversations, setting up direct debits, dealing with customers who needed to reschedule payments and more. Basically they were working identically to Stockport staff. It was seamless." This was only possible because Civica provided fully trained revenues and benefits officers, meaning that they could usually handle the call at 'first touch' to resolve issues immediately. As Sharon says: "Civica offered a specialist service. Call handlers often just take pre-set information from a form and then send it to the back office. But Civica staff know what they have to ask rather than relying on forms."

Overall Civica helped Stockport to maintain a high level of customer service at the busiest time of year. Sharon confirms that customers that dealt with OnDemand staff received the same quality of service they would've if they'd spoken to a Council employee. "Our customers can be challenging, everyone is impatient. People underestimate the skills needed to answer calls and the Civica staff were very good. There were minimal complaints – no more than we'd have about our own staff."

Civica also provided the flexibility that the Council needed. OnDemand is not an all-or-nothing service, allowing customers to flex the resource provided up or down as well as end the contract whenever they want. As it happened, demand throughout the contract remained relatively constant, but Sharon says that any dips in activity during a day allowed her to pull her staff off the phones for training, safe in the knowledge that Civica was handling the calls. "That consistency gives added flexibility. We wouldn't be able to do any training at that time of year without having OnDemand in the background."

Seamless handling of high call volumes prevented disruption to Stockport's customer service

- ▶ Service set up quickly with staff trained on the Council's specific systems
- ▶ Provided staff with expertise in council tax
- ▶ Civica team handled around 550 calls per week with an average response time of eight seconds
- ▶ High quality of service delivered to the Council's customers
- ▶ Flexibility offered peace of mind for senior council staff
- ▶ Provided assurance that the Council's contact centre could deal with the seasonal surge in demand

"OnDemand is a really good service – it was just like having more people on my team. I was able to give them the level of discretion I give my own staff who I've known for years. They worked hard with customers who can be difficult. It's all very well talking cost, what IT systems you use and so on, but when customers are difficult it's about the quality of the service delivered."

Sharon Basing
Team Manager, Stockport Direct.

