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To: Communities Cabinet Committee

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Subject: Review of Interactive Voice Recognition Pilot

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary : This report has been compiled following the successful Interactive Voice Recognition pilot carried out in the Contact Centre. The Cabinet Committee is asked to comment on and note the contents of the report.

ON AVERAGE 23% OF SOCIAL SERVICES CALLS THAT COULD RELATE TO ADULT AND CHILD PROTECTION ISSUES, ARE MADE VIA THE 247247 TELEPHONE NUMBER. THE USE OF THE IVR HAS ENABLED THESE CALLS TO BE TRANSFERRED DIRECTLY TO THE RIGHT SKILLED ADVISOR FIRST TIME AND ENSURED THAT THESE CALLS ARE PRIORITISED. IN THE WEEK COMMENCING 10 DECEMBER 2012, 84% OF THESE SOCIAL SERVICES CALLS WERE ANSWERED IN 20 SECONDS AND 99% ANSWERED.

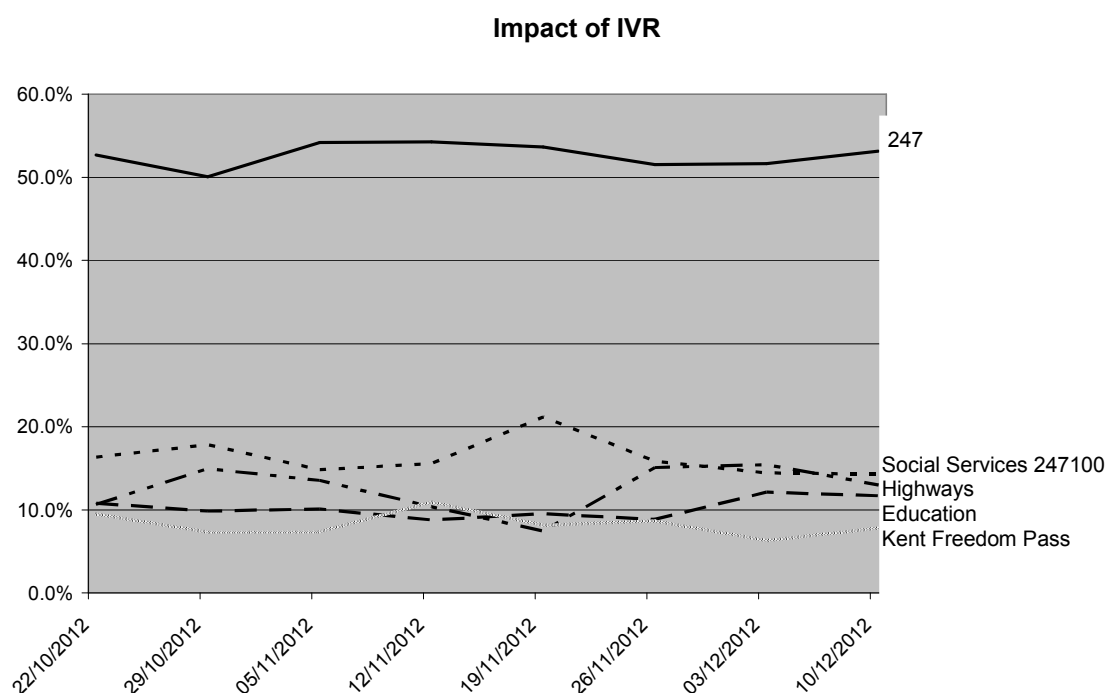
1. Introduction

- 1.1 Concerns were expressed at the Performance & Evaluation Board on the 4 July 2012 about service level performance of Contact Point during the previous period. Call volumes then increased further during July and customers using the generic 247247 number had reported difficulty getting through to appropriately skilled advisors. This was a particular concern for high priority calls such as Social Services which were potentially being delayed behind less urgent calls.
- 1.2 Interactive Voice Response (IVR) is a tool widely used in Contact Centre Industry. The objective of IVR is to automatically triage the call first time to the right skilled advisor or to give a brief automatic message designed to answer their query or to act as intelligent signposting to direct callers to self-service options available via the web or mobile technologies.

- 1.3 IVR is effective in improving performance and quality and could potentially reduce costs. The system reduces call waiting times for customers and reduces double handling as the call is answered first time by the right skilled person and avoids the need for the caller to call back or be transferred – effectively reducing failure demand. IVR offers the caller a limited number of options to select by pressing a number on their telephone keypad. These will not exceed three/four options (or layers), and offer the opportunity to be connected with the service expertise more quickly than waiting in a generic queue. Despite some misconceptions that IVR can reduce the ‘personal touch’, customer feedback has shown customers value a more rapid, responsive system and still retain the choice of a more personal option, as the system will always provide an opportunity to speak to an advisor.
- 1.4 Following approval by the Leader and Cabinet Members for a small number of appropriate services, a three-month trial of an IVR system started at the end of July 2012. CMM agreed to the introduction of IVR on 26 November 2012. This report reviews progress to date, with early evidence of its effectiveness and how we plan to extend the usage of IVR.

2. IVR and its outcomes : 247247

- 2.1 In relation to the IVR on the 247247 line, the overall contact volumes on this line were just 6896 in August, 7681 in September, 7627 in October, 6525 in November reduced from July volumes of 19,079. The following table outlines the more detailed analysis on the IVR line.



- 2.2 In relation to the IVR on the 247247 line, as shown above the majority of callers are being put directly into the right queue. The remaining callers required other council services, such as libraries. This has significantly reduced the number of callers who have to be placed in a queue, as the advisor who handles the initial call for activities 1 to 4 (Highways, Social Services 247, Education and Kent Freedom Pass) now automatically has the right skills set. It is not cost effective or practical to train every advisor to handle all call types. This would require huge financial investment and is unnecessary with the appropriate use of technology. This is standard practice across the Contact Centre industry and this is used widely in Central/Local Government, as evidenced in Surrey and Northamptonshire.
- 2.3 The IVR has been a critical factor in improving access for Social Service callers. Prior to the introduction of the IVR on the 247247 line, it was not possible to prioritise these calls ahead of less critical or high risk contacts. The caller can now select option 2 for social services and the call will be transferred directly to the 247100 line. This line together with Children's Social Services is given the highest priority within Contact Point. In the week commencing 10 December 2012 we answered 84% of Social Services 247100 within 20 seconds and handled 99% of calls received.
- 2.4 In relation to Kent Freedom Pass, the IVR has enabled calls to be passed directly to Advisors who have just been trained to undertake this service. As this is mainly a seasonal enquiry with a large demand in the summer months, it has been possible to limit the time spent on training, maintain service quality and provide extra resource very quickly. This is a good example of how the system can be responsive to peak demand whether seasonal, weather related or in response to an emergency incident. Each of these types of events creates unanticipated demand which is more effectively handled using technology appropriately.
- 2.5 The feedback from advisors is that it has helped them to handle calls more effectively. There have been fewer complaints from consumers about having to be placed in another queue and it has reduced unnecessary contact volumes by encouraging channel shift to self-serve web options.
- 2.6 GovMetric, our automated customer feedback system, has been operational since the start of August. So far feedback has been received from 7216 consumers (as of the 20 December 2012) who wished to comment on their experience of Contact Point. There have been only two complaints about the IVR system.

3. Highways IVR

- 3.1 The use of the IVR messaging has had the effect of reducing the number of queries received by advisors relating to overgrown vegetation on Kent roads. In turn, this has improved service capability to handle other highways services calls and emergencies. The caller always has the option to speak to an advisor if the message does not answer their query. With the reduction in vegetation call volume, the IVR option was changed to 'drainage' during

September. Although there is no need to retain this specific message over the coming months, this message facility can be effectively used again for winter maintenance, severe weather or adverse road conditions, for example Operation Stack, or other specific issues.

- 3.2 Currently, it normally takes three weeks to train an advisor to handle the entire range of Highways calls to the required standard. Using an IVR option, it has been possible to train 8 advisors to handle Speed Awareness Course calls in 4 hours, and achieve productivity from those staff in a shorter period. Typically, these calls total 800 per week. The effect of being able to direct these calls efficiently, has meant that our fully trained and experienced Highways advisors can now focus on other Highway service calls. The caller experience is to 'press 1' on the IVR and the caller is put through to an advisor handling Speed Awareness. The use of IVR could support the option of undertaking modular training for Highways such as potholes and street lighting – enhancing the efficiency and productivity of advisors and reducing the need to train the entire service on block. An advisor could then, over some months, increase the scope of highways calls handled, and a wider staff resource could be trained in key areas to support peak demand.
- 3.3 There has been a reduction in calls on Speed Awareness of -80 down to 200 per week, as the IVR message has encouraged more consumers to channel shift to web instead and use Kent.gov.uk.

4. Education IVR

- 4.1 September has historically been the busiest month in Contact Point, due to the number of Education calls received on issues such as Primary and Secondary school admissions, Kent Test and School Transport.
- 4.2 During this month, these contact volumes have an adverse impact on other services such as Social Services 247100. The information provided by the advisors is limited and consistent on the majority of contacts, as for example on Primary School Admissions it will take 20 working days from application to process. If the Consumer pressed option 3 for Primary School Admissions then they would receive the following message "Please note that it is possible to apply for a Primary School place by downloading an in year application form from www.kent.gov.uk/schools. If your call is regarding an application you have already made for a Primary School place, please note that due to the summer holidays the current turnaround time for an application is 20 working days. If you are calling with regards to the September 2013 school intake, please note applications can be made from the beginning of November. For any other enquiries, please hold for the next available advisor."
- 4.3 The volume of contacts to the Education line has reduced by 3362 from September 2011 (23.3%) due in part to the IVR. These efficiencies supported Contact Point in improving its performance and effectiveness during late September and October 2012. The target for service level and answer rate were also achieved for Education in September 2012. It has also freed up

time for the ELS back office staff to deal with applications, as the use of IVR also supported the closure of the lines to the Education team between 14.00 and 16.00 every afternoon.

5. Impact of IVR

- 5.1 The primary function of the IVR system is to place the caller as quickly as possible with the appropriately trained advisor and/or to provide them with the information required – with more calls successfully resolved at the first point of contact. The principle is to keep the IVR simple and to avoid the use of multi layering. The early signs as outlined above are that IVR is effective in improving performance and quality and value as part of a range of measures designed to improve the customer service experience. The system is reducing call waiting times for customers and the right person answers the call first time. **If the customer does not want to use the IVR, then their call will always be answered by an advisor.**
- 5.2 Customers are receiving a more informed and accurate response to their queries first time. Ultimately costs will reduce, as training will be streamlined; become more focussed on complex tasks with added value to the caller, whilst also helping to reduce overall call volumes by promoting channel shift. Over time this could either reduce the number of advisors needed to support anticipated service demands and realise savings, or provide opportunities for new business and income generation.

6. Extending the use of IVR

- 6.1 The extended use of IVR would assist further consumers in being able to connect to the right skilled advisor on the first occasion. The majority of calls received at Contact Point are via the 247247 number and the introduction of further options, such as Registrations, Blue Badges and Libraries would increase the percentage of calls directed to the correct Advisor by a further 15%.
- 6.2 Consumers calling the registrations line, require a variety of services such as births, certificates, ceremonies and deaths. The use of a limited IVR would improve the consumer experience of using this service. For example consumers calling for a certificate have to be transferred to Mansion House Tunbridge Wells. The advisor can not assist with these calls and they just place it in the telephone queue to be answered. The IVR could automate this process, the consumer presses the option for registrations and the call is automatically transferred to Mansion House.
- 6.3 We will work closely with the service owners when implementing any further IVR and seek their approval. The IVR will be designed to improve the journey for the customer and it will avoid the use of multi layering.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 The IVR trial and its use therefore after has been very successful and it is effective in improving performance, quality and efficiency. The system is

reducing call waiting times for customers and reduces double handling as the right person answers first time and fulfils the call. The IVR trial also highlighted how its usage could be broadened, to make further improvements and to deal with specific incidents. It has introduced flexibility in our approach to training, by reducing the duration of training in complex services, enabling new Advisors to be operational in a much shorter period of time.

- 7.2 IVR is acceptable to consumers if it avoids the use of multi layering and they always have the option to speak to an advisor. Consumers dislike however being placed into another queue if the original advisor is not skilled to handle their query. It also ensures that urgent calls such as Social Services Adult and Child protection received on the 247247 line are prioritised.
- 7.3 In view of the success of the trial, the use of IVR will be extended to other incoming lines in consultation with service owners. The IVR will always allow the consumer the option to speak to an advisor and it will avoid the use of multi layering. Feedback from consumers via Govmetrics will be reviewed at least weekly, to ensure that any adverse comments about the IVR are investigated and changes are made where appropriate.

8. Recommendation

- 8.1 The Committee is asked to comment on and note the contents of the report.

Background Documents

N/A