
CUSTOMER AND ONLINE SERVICES – ANNUAL SERVICE REVIEW REPORT 2023/2024

Report by: Diarmuid Cotter, Head of Customer & Online Services

Wards Affected: N/A

Purpose

To present an overview of the Service, detail the service planning, change and improvement work undertaken in 2023/24 and to provide an assessment of performance to inform scrutiny and future service planning.

Recommendation(s)

The scrutiny committee is asked to:

- Consider and comment on the remodelled 'annual service review' report format and related products
- Review the progress and performance of Customer and Online Services for 2023/24 and the activity undertaken in 2024/25 to date
- Note the Service planning objectives for 2024/25 and the three-year direction of travel

Resource Implications

There are no resource implications arising from this report.

Legal & Risk Implications

There are risks in not meeting Best Value requirements that can lead to additional monitoring/audit, external intervention and/or loss of public confidence.

Impact Assessment

An EqIA is not required as this report does not propose any changes to policies or services.

Consultation

Consultation is not required as the report does not propose a change to existing policies and practices.

1.0 Purpose of this report

1.1 This is the Customer and Online Services Annual Review for 2023-24. It looks back over the previous year and assesses how the service has performed in relation to its priorities and challenges and looks forward to the changes and improvements that need considered next and the Service's priorities for the next 12 months.

1.2 In the report you will find:

- An overview of the Service's roles and responsibilities
- Budget and workforce information to put service delivery into context
- The key priorities the Service has been working to and how these relate to the Plan for Fife and council reforms
- An assessment of how the service has performed in relation to these priorities
- Objectives and themes for service delivery, change and/or improvement going forward

This information is then used to inform annual service planning and the strategic direction of the service over the next three years.

1.3 This approach to annual review and reporting is part of the Council's updated public performance reporting and scrutiny arrangements. More information on that and how the Council performs and compares with other local authorities can be found online here www.fife.gov.uk/performance

1.4 Performance information and related case studies for Customer and Online Services will be available online. www.fife.gov.uk/performance.

2.0 Service Overview

Key role and responsibilities 2023/24

2.1 Customer & Online Services (COS) is part of the Communities Directorate and is established to:

- Drive an integrated approach to customer contact across the Council, improving access to services, assessment and signposting across all channels, and with a particular emphasis on digital delivery
- Maximise the collection of Council Tax, Rent and Business Rates whilst identifying and ensuring support for the most vulnerable

2.2 The Service's strategic approach supports the Plan for Fife and the council's reform agenda by using evidence and digital solutions to join-up public services, so we can focus on people's needs and act one step sooner to prevent crisis and tackle poverty.

2.3 The service is responsible for delivering a significant part of the council's customer strategy through the following functional teams:

- Contact Centre

- Customer Service Centres
- Registration
- Escalation & Resolution
- Information Management & Requests
- Online Services
- Financial Wellbeing and Revenues.

2.4 Operationally the service manages 15 customer service centres/points, a 24/7 contact centre and Fife Council's website fife.gov.uk.

2.5 COS supports the most vulnerable communities in Fife by administering the Scottish Welfare Fund, assessing housing benefit, council tax reduction and education benefits (including education maintenance allowance). The service is also responsible for managing the community alarm function to support independent living and connection to social work services.

2.6 The service bills, collects, and recovers council tax and non-domestic rates. Other statutory functions include corporate management of our obligation to meet requests made under Data Protection and Freedom of Information Legislation, customer complaints and the registration of births, deaths, and marriages.

Budget breakdown 2023/24

2.7 The Service had an annual budget of £16.546 million. This is detailed in the table below:

A10030 CUSTOMER SERVICE IMPROVEMENT				
	Budget by Business Area	Provisional Outturn	Variance	Budgeted FTE by Business Area
	23/24	23/24	23/24	23/24
	£m	£m	£m	FTE
Customer Service Improvement	16.546	15.845	-0.701	418.64
Total Net Expenditure	16.546	15.845	-0.701	418.64
	Expenditure by business area	Provisional Outturn	Variance	
	23/24	23/24	23/24	
	£m	£m	£m	
Employee Costs	15.407	15.126	-0.281	
Premises related expenditure	0.164	0.225	0.061	
Transport Related Expenditure	0.039	0.053	0.014	
Supplies and Services	3.556	2.733	-0.823	
Third Party Payments	1.979	2.736	0.757	
Support Services Charges	0.000	0.000	0.000	
	21.144	20.873	-0.272	
	Gross Income	Provisional Outturn	Variance	
	23/24	23/24	23/24	
	£m	£m	£m	

Internal Income	-3.735	-4.270	-0.535
External Income	-0.863	-0.757	0.106
	-4.599	-5.028	-0.429

2.8 The majority of the expenditure relates to Employee Costs. The internal income generated in year relates to income recovered from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for services carried out on their behalf. This includes services such as calls taken for Housing Services by the Contact Centre and Debt Management works carried out by Financial Wellbeing and Revenues. The majority of External Income relates to income generated by the Registrations services with the remainder relating to Grant Income

2.9 The service was significantly underspent in year which was mainly due to the level of internal income received. COS and the HRA are currently working together to establish what the level of service required in future years is and how much income this will generate for COS. A further review can then take place on how COS makes best use of this income going forward.

Workforce profile 2023/24

2.8 The workforce comprises 418.64 full time equivalent (FTE) roles:

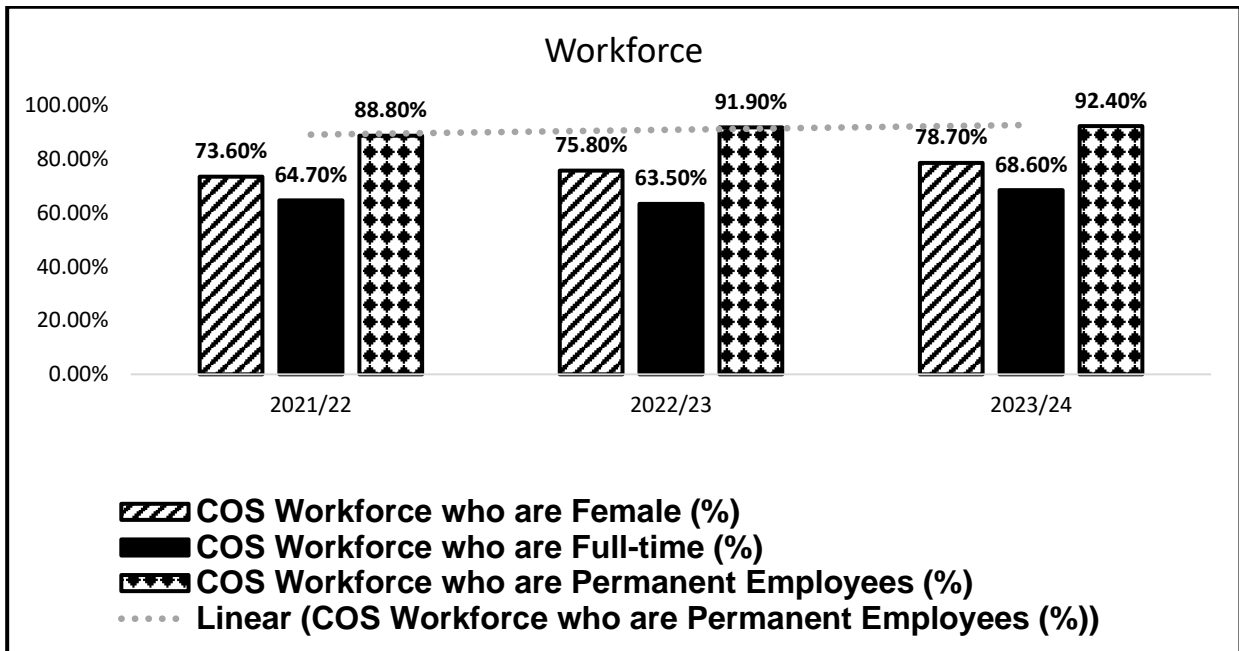
- 34% of staff are part-time as the service operates some 24/7 services
- It is still a mature workforce with 31% aged over 55 and only 4.1% aged under 25
- 78.7% of the team is female and 21.3% male

2.9 Staff turnover is relatively high. 28% of employees have been with the service less than five years. This is positive as the service remains a good entry point for people starting work at the council, with many progressing their careers - particularly into the Housing Service.

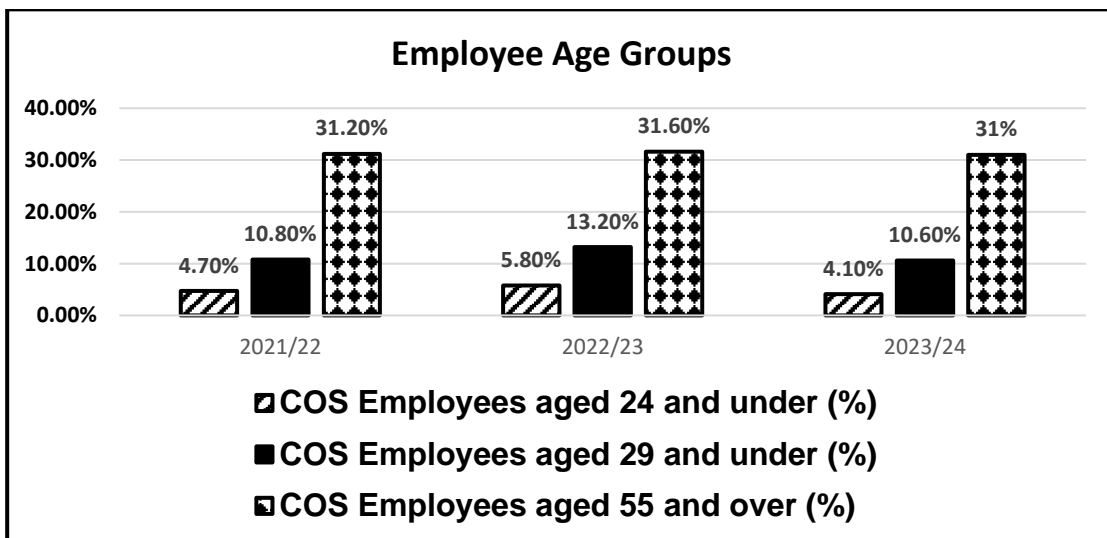
2.10 Attendance dropped marginally in 2023/24 compared to 2022/23, but both show an improvement on 2021/22, with 16.32 working days lost per FTE. There is a continuing focus on supporting employees through periods of ill health. Management and supervisors within the service have all completed mentally healthy workplace training.

2.11 Trends against key workforce performance indicators are shown below:

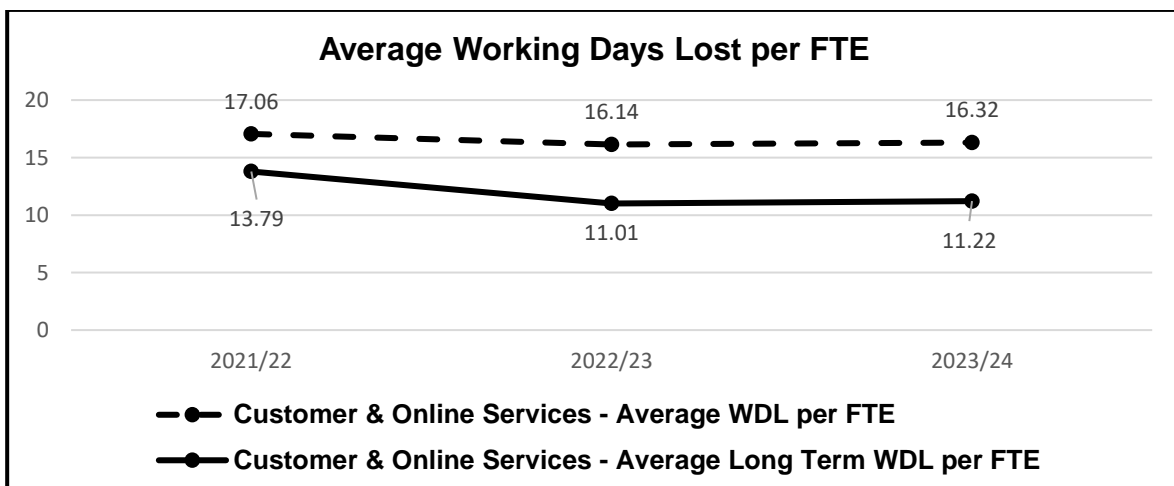
Workforce



Employees age groups



Working Days Lost (WDL) per FTE



3.0 Priorities and Performance

3.1 Service Priorities 2023/24

The service had two strategic priorities in 2023/24, to:

1. Make better use of welfare funding to tackle poverty and help people out of crisis, by using insight, data and more joined up processes to better effect
2. Improve responsiveness of the contact centre for people in most need, and to continue a shift to digital channels so that those who self-serve can easily access help when they choose to.

3.2 How we delivered

3.2.1

Priority 1: Make better use of welfare funding to tackle poverty and crisis

What we said

We would:

- Return processing times for crisis support to pre-pandemic levels
- Improve processing times for core benefits – housing benefit and council tax reduction
- Train more staff in available benefits, eligibility criteria and application processing
- Maximise funding/benefit uptake by proactively telling people what they're entitled to and avoiding multiple application processes by implementing the 'benefit checker' and FORT a multiagency referral system across other teams and partners

What we achieved

Overall teams have been successful in these aims.

- In 23/24 community care grant average award timescale was 21.3 working days against a target of 15. A strategy to outsource processing whilst new staff are trained will reduce timescales back to within 15 working days.
- In 23/24 processing times for core benefits (housing benefit and Council Tax reduction) were achieved within the Department for work and Pensions timescales of 22 days for new applications and 7 for notification to changes of benefits. Homeless applicants continue to have their applications assessed within one working day.
- Staff across various teams in the council have been trained to use the 'Benefit checker'.

The ongoing cost-of-living crisis has put pressure on customer services teams and there is no sign of this abating. However, it's encouraging to note that fewer people are applying for crisis grants and, where they are, we're able to allocate significantly higher funding to help improve their situation. Overall, more funding was awarded to

people in 2023/24 than in previous years and processing times for benefits and grants improved across the board.

Challenges remain in attracting new staff to benefits processing teams, an issue also faced by other areas. However, the move from housing benefit to Universal Credit for all but pension age claimants will reduce the housing benefit caseload, easing some of the pressure on COS resources.

How we know

Average processing times (days)

Average processing time (days)	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	Target (Working Days)
Crisis Grants	1	3	2	1	1
Community Care Grants	21.2	37.3	9.8	21.3	15
Housing Benefit - new claims	20.7	32.7	18.9	18	22
Housing Benefit - change of circumstances	5.4	5.6	4.3	4.2	7
Council Tax Reduction - new claims	24.2	31	19.4	16.7	22
Council Tax Reduction - change of circumstances	9.1	8.3	4.2	3.8	7

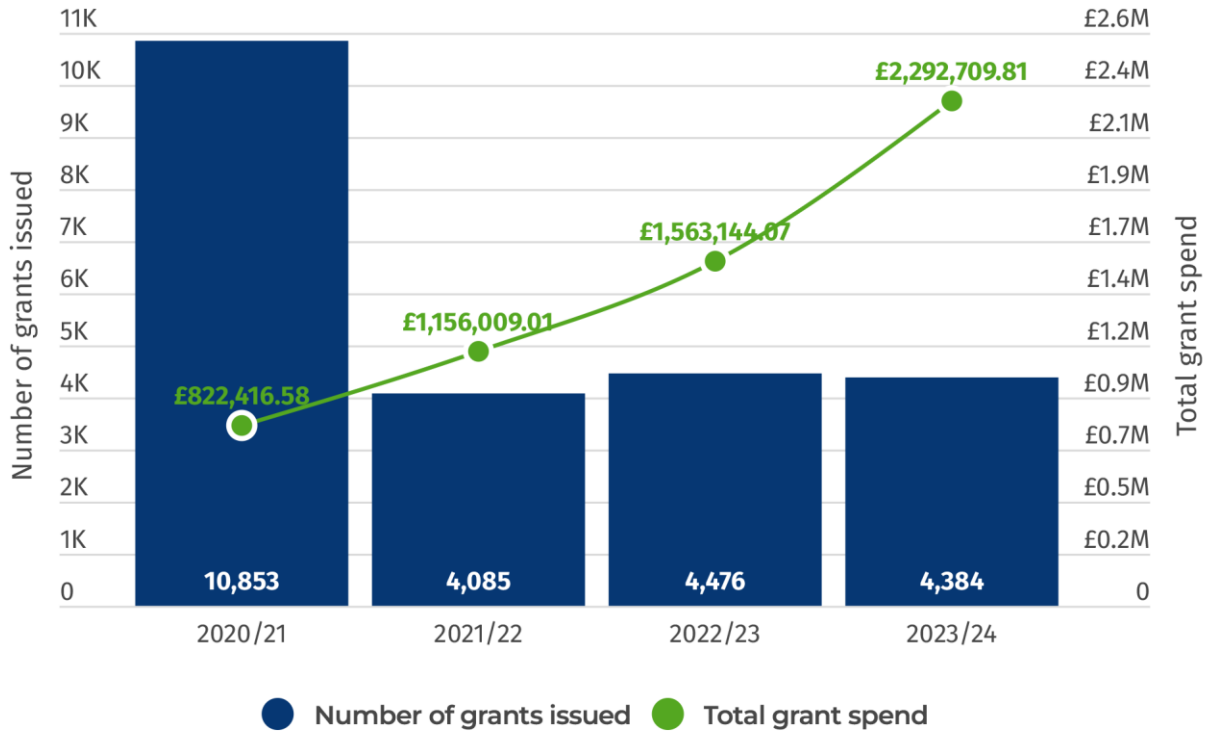
Scottish Welfare Fund spend

Scottish Welfare Fund	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Community Care Grants	£822,416.58	£1,156,009.01	£1,563,144.07	£2,292,709.81
Crisis Grants	£2,540,079.33	£2,543,949.24	£2,791,807.41	£2,357,190.21
Total	£3,362,495.91	£3,699,958.25	£4,354,951.48	£4,649,900.02

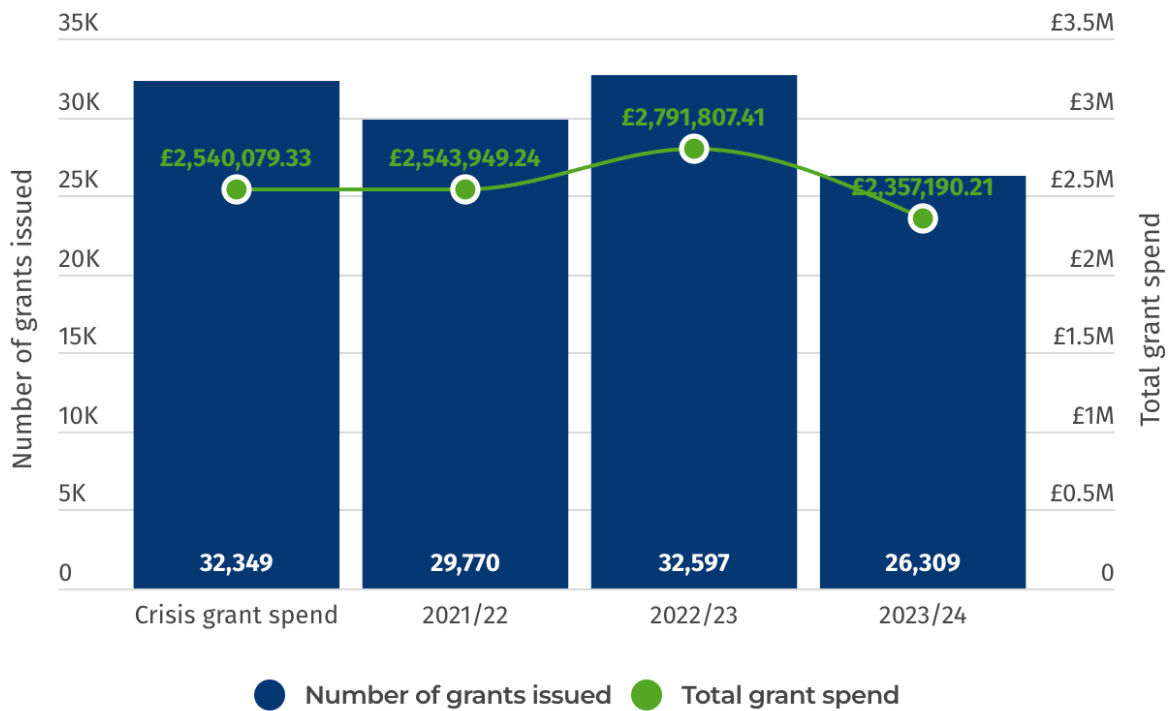
Scottish Welfare Fund grants issued

Scottish Welfare Fund	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Community Care Grants	10,853	4,085	4,476	4,384
Crisis Grants	32,349	29,770	32,597	26,309

Community Care Grant



Crisis Grant



3.2.2

Priority 2: Improving contact centre responsiveness

Contact centre responsiveness has always proved challenging as it is difficult to match resources to varying demands. There are five main skill sets in the Contact Centre environment and figures are detailed below. Call answering performance target is 91%.

	2021/22					2022/23					2023/24				
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
Revenues	90.9%	86.7%	89.4%	82.1%	87.0%	82.5%	81.4%	81.5%	85.3%	82.7%	85.5%	81.2%	85.4%	81.6%	83.4%
General	79.3%	70.0%	89.3%	91.1%	81.3%	88.0%	77.8%	81.3%	88.4%	83.8%	83.3%	81.7%	84.6%	83.5%	83.2%
Repairs	71.6%	71.6%	79.3%	83.0%	76.3%	81.2%	79.3%	75.4%	78.3%	78.5%	88.2%	89.6%	81.6%	80.4%	84.4%
Social Work	88.0%	86.2%	89.4%	92.6%	89.0%	91.7%	90.6%	88.8%	89.5%	90.2%	90.4%	92.4%	95.0%	94.5%	93.0%
Out of hours	97.7%	97.0%	95.3%	97.0%	96.7%	98.6%	98.2%	96.4%	97.9%	97.7%	98.8%	99.1%	98.4%	99.3%	98.9%

What we said

We would:

- Deliver more transactions online and automate activity via fife.gov.uk
- Refocus contact centre resource to improve call answering across all areas
- Optimise use of staff time to support the most vulnerable customers

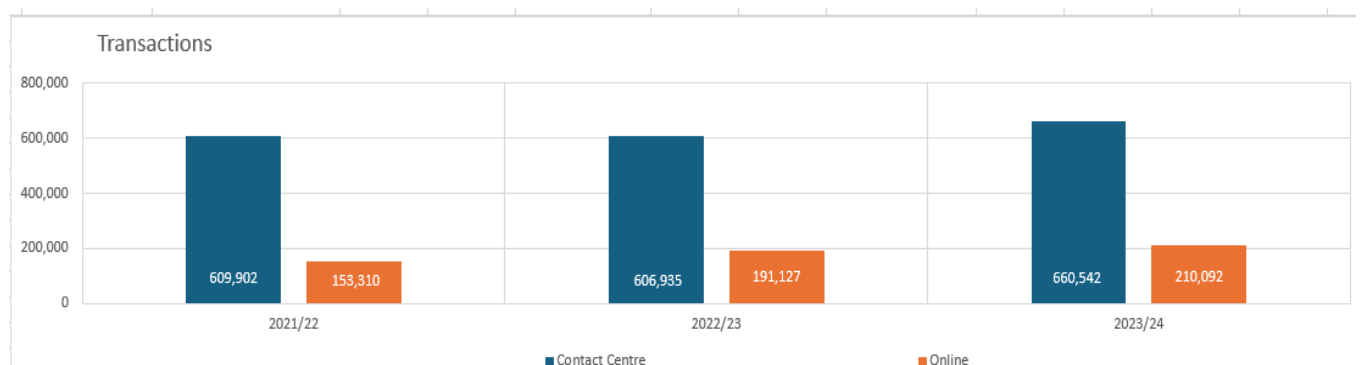
What we achieved

Overall teams have been successful in these aims, as shown by the related performance indicators below. The contact centre remains an area of high demand particularly the repairs centre as they continue to manage increased workloads and the challenge of optimising schedules for tradespeople. More generally, there are challenges in keeping up with digital progression both for customer contact and ease of delivering services.

How we know

Transactions

Contact Centre Calls v Online, for the same transaction type i.e. missed bin collection



Contact Centre Customer Contact including Online

Financial Year	Qtr	Calls	Chat	Community Alarms	Email	Online	Scheduling
2021/22	Year	446,644	20,132	163,258	118,405	14,773	0
2022/23	Year	444,896	4,855	162,039	107,705	24,945	53,622
2023/24	Year	460,396	2,749	200,146	120,407	19,276	67,660

3.3 Wider operational performance

3.3.1 The Service monitors a number of management/operational indicators throughout the year. These are available for member scrutiny online here: Of particular note:

- Continued high rates of council tax recovery (95.2% for 2023/24) is supporting the council's total available budget to spend on services
- Following policy shift, we have increased revenue raised by £3,387,978.00 due to charging 200% council tax for second homes

3.3.2 COS is also responsible for two Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) indicators, Council Tax Income and Council Tax collection. The latest set of LGBF data published covers 2022/23.

[Benchmarking | Benchmarking \(improvementservice.org.uk\)](#)

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Cost of collecting council tax per dwelling (£)	£1.68	£1.53	£2.58
Income from council tax received by year end (%)	93.6%	95.3%	95.8%

3.3.3 The cost of collecting council tax per dwelling increased in 2022/23 in line with the national trend, however Fife is ranked second in Scotland against this indicator at £2.58 compared to the family group cost of £5.73 and £6.84 for Scotland.

3.3.4 In 2022/23 our council tax income recovery improved again to 95.8%, slightly below the family group (96.5%) and Scotland (96.2%) levels. For 2023/24 we set a target of 96.3% and achieved 95.2%. This performance remains broadly in line with other local authority results and reflects a reduction in collection due to the cost-of-living crisis. For 2024/2025 the target has been set at 95.5%.

4.0 Priorities ahead

- 4.1 The service will continue to work to improvement targets across all core performance indicators. However, in 2024/25 resources will be focussed on the main change and improvement goals outlined below.
- 4.2 Establish a new model of integrated customer service delivery across the council to support efficient and effective self-service and to help people move easily from one channel to the next – via chat, social media, telephone or face to face - without losing their reference points or having to reiterate information. Making processes easier will support income generation and free up resources to focus on service delivery and prevention.
- 4.3 Lead and design No Wrong Door customer service reforms to provide a more holistic and targeted approach, addressing the diverse needs of residents and providing more comprehensive support and early intervention for those living in complex circumstances.
- 4.4 Make better use of digital solutions to improve repair scheduling for a more responsive service for customers as well as a more efficient business model.
- 4.5 Redesign registration services to streamline the process and integrate systems.
- 4.6 These priorities will prompt discussions on service redesign and change that leadership teams across the council, key partners, elected members and staff will all be involved in at appropriate points.

Report contacts

Diarmuid Cotter, Head of Customer & Online Services

Claire Bates, Customer Service Manager

Claire Lindsay, Revenues Manager

Appendices

Appendix 1: Inside story – How a better use of welfare funding helped tackle crisis and poverty 2023/24

We know that too many people in need miss out on money they're entitled to. With the

cost of living continuing to tip many people into crisis, Fife Council allocated an additional £2 million to top up the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) in 23/04. To make the most of SWF funding, and all other benefits available, we wanted to make better use of our resources, insight and data to maximise financial support for those who need it most.

Both community care grant and crisis grant application numbers declined compared to 2022/23. However, the average award was higher, reflecting the rise in the cost of household goods, so overall use of the SWF budget has significantly increased.

Additional benefits

The additional money put into the Scottish welfare Fund enable the fund to continue awarding goods on what is classed as high priority, this means that the balance of crisis grants and goods supplied is equally balanced throughout the financial year, without the top up from Fife Council the Scottish welfare fund would have run out of money in October 2023. Before that they would have been forced to award on the high most compelling category which means that applicants would receive smaller crisis grant payments and potentially no or very limited community care grant goods.

From reviewing goods supplied in previous years we realised that supplying basic products doesn't always make the most financial sense in the long run. There was additional funding of £430,000 to the SWF to provide a better-quality carpet and cover more rooms in the homes in need. The extra insulation this provides helps keep homes warmer in the winter, so that people can use less energy, reduce their carbon emissions and lower their fuel bills - while also being more comfortable and healthier.

We trained decision makers in the SWF team to identify applicants who would also be eligible for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). SWF staff started to process financial DHP decisions and explain to customers that by applying for one type of assistance, they would automatically be considered for the other benefit without having to make two separate applications. This made the process easier for customers, caught those who may not have realised different benefits existed and increased the value of support packages for people in most need. As a consequence, the value of DHP we distributed increased significantly, from £5,333,198.03 in 2022/23 to £6,114,089.02 in 2023/24.

Extending support

We developed the Community Support teams skills so that they can play a more preventative role beyond initial crisis support. They started to issue fuel top up vouchers (previously referrals had to be made by housing officers or Cosy Kingdom) and were also trained in front line energy advice so they could let customers know how to make their voucher last longer. The team has a direct link with Cosy Kingdom and, via the FORT system, can see previous customer contact which helps tailor advice and support offers, and make direct referrals for additional support from Cosy Kingdom without passing people on to another team to repeat themselves

Between October 2023 and March 2024, we provided 2,147 fuel tops. The scheme cost £361,735.00

We recognise that when someone asks for a fuel top up, paying for fuel is rarely their only problem. So, the Community Support team were also trained to carry out benefit checks. Now they can help people receive their full benefits entitlement, getting closer to the root

cause of the customer's situation and – hopefully – prevent them from reaching crisis point again.

We've also started using data to profile and proactively target specific groups via the Low-Income Family Tracker (LIFT) tool. For example, we used it to identify 198 people who would be eligible for benefit cap mitigation, contacted them by phone and letter, and subsequently made payments of £162,215 between April and November 2023.

The financial wellbeing and revenues service take a holistic internal approach to customers financial needs. Each team whether that be welfare, benefits or revenues work closely together to ensure customers get any support they need across the service, for example a customer who calls the revenues helpdesk about their council tax debt would be offered other appropriate support they are entitled to such as a benefit check, discretionary housing payment, council tax reduction application or a debt write off referral, as well as referrals to 3rd parties such as CARF or other agencies as debt can often be a identifier of poverty. The revenues helpdesk staff have had special phone training on how to help customers in debt.

Appendix 2: Inside story – Improving Contact Centre Responsiveness

For many residents the gateway to the Council has traditionally been via the telephone. We know that as technology has improved the need to offer digital contact has come with that. As the generation of customers have grown accustomed to using smart phones & iPad's, the need to access Council facilities using this smart technology has grown. Whilst not all generations are using smart technology, there is still a need for the traditional telephone. The Contact Centre has evolved from the traditional telephone call style

Contact Centre into a diverse digital Contact Centre, using emails, chat, social media and scheduling.

Over the past three years, significant efforts have been made in collaboration with colleagues from all departments to enhance digital access for residents, reducing the need for telephone-based services. Fife residents can now conveniently report online street lighting and road faults, missed bins, bulk uplifts, and housing repairs. They can also request birth and death certificates, make rent and council tax payments, apply for free school meals and clothing grants, enrol their children in school, and access many other services online. These efforts have resulted in a significant increase in the number of users accessing digital services, reducing the volume of phone calls to the Contact Centre. By leveraging existing technology and incorporating new technological advancements, we have seen usage rise from 153,310 in 2021/22 to 210,092 in 2023/24, marking a 37% increase. This number is expected to continue growing as more services capitalize on the benefits of both current and emerging technologies.

With the increase in digital access this has allowed the Contact Centre to improve call answering across all areas. With more access to services online, we have been able to use our resource and optimise staff time to support those more vulnerable customers. Our teams have an abundance of knowledge of services offered by the Council and no matter which phone line a customer calls, the needs of customers are addressed and referrals made if needed. There is an understanding that not all generations are computer literate and the teams across the Contact Centre are able to help those most in need.

Some teams handle more than just phone calls. For example, our Repair Centre operates as a one-stop shop for housing tenants, allowing them to report repairs both online and by telephone. The same team manages the scheduling of repairs across various trades, ensuring a consistent level of service and care for all tenants, regardless of how they choose to contact the Council. Access to repair updates via this team is readily available, helping to build trust between housing tenants and the Council.

Our Social Work team plays a crucial role in supporting vulnerable individuals throughout Fife by working closely with social workers to ensure the best possible outcomes. They serve as the essential first point of contact, acting as the initial link between callers and the Social Work service. By providing compassionate and responsive assistance, the team helps to assess needs, direct people to appropriate resources, and coordinate with social workers to deliver timely support. Their efforts are vital in fostering strong relationships and trust between vulnerable individuals and the social care services they rely on.

The digital transformation has enabled the Contact Centre to improve call response times, ensuring that each customer receives the appropriate attention and information from the outset. It allows the team to focus on providing accurate guidance, directing callers to the right services when needed, and ensuring that those without internet access receive the necessary support.