

**Swindon Tenants Campaign Group Media Release
December 12th 2018**

Still kept hanging on the telephone

According to the results of a freedom of information request the average wait on the housing repairs phone line was 6 minutes 43 seconds in October. Tenants who are waiting for 20-40 minutes will look on these statistics with scepticism, especially as the message on the phone line tells us that the average wait is more than 20 minutes. If the average wait is less than seven minutes why are we told it's more than 20? They can't both be right. Is this message a crude means of making people end the call and to force them to go on-line? STCG has asked council officers to take this message off but thus far they have refused.

Even if the statistics we have been given are accurate it is still an appalling service. The industry standard for abandoned calls is 8-10 %, yet the average on the housing repairs line for the year up to October was 55% abandoned calls (see table below). There were 38,000 abandoned calls on the repairs phone line, as compared to 31,000 calls answered. Add the abandoned calls for other housing issues on the same line and that is nearly 58,000. So the housing phone line has 48% of abandoned calls for the council overall.

The council is hoping that these numbers will come down as people turn to the internet. But that depends on whether the system works well. The jury is still out on that.

Emergency repairs

It's bad enough that people are struggling to report repairs which might be urgent, such as a central heating boiler going down, but tenants are told to report emergency repairs on the same line. This makes no sense. Not only is it potentially disastrous for the tenants. It can lead to money being wasted. It may well increase the cost to the housing revenue account if tenants cannot report emergencies quickly and easily. The phone lines should either be adequately staffed or there should be a separate number for emergencies.

Martin Wicks, Secretary of Swindon Tenants Campaign Group said:

“The consequences of inadequate staffing in the Call Centre are being suffered disproportionately by council tenants. The rate of abandoned calls is five times worse than the industry standard, yet the council is proposing to cut the staff even further. In the current financial year to October, the average number of staff on the phones has been less than 10 in five of seven months, as compared to a nominal staffing level of 12.4 Full-Time Equivalent posts.

The move to “digitisation by default”, with its 85% target, was irresponsible and reckless. It is a guaranteed means of providing a worse service. The 20 minute plus message on the housing repairs lines appears to be a means of pressuring tenants to go on-line.

The average percentage of agency staff in the call centre across 2018 has been two thirds. With the best will in the world this means these staff won't have the same level of

knowledge as permanent staff. When it comes to housing repairs the detail can be quite complicated. If the wrong information is taken down then council staff calling at our homes can easily turn up to find the job they are expecting is not the one which needs doing and they may not have the necessary piece of kit. This is a waste of time and resources. For tenants who have to take time off work to be in, this is doubly frustrating.

What we really need is a dedicated team of permanent staff who develop the knowledge to enable a job to be done on the first visit.

In relation to emergency repairs it makes no sense directing them to a phone bank which is staffed by insufficient numbers to enable reporting in good time. If there was adequate staffing then it wouldn't be a problem. Otherwise there should be a separate number which staff can respond to as a priority.”

Note: In 2018 to October the Call Centre had 318,000 calls but the capacity to answer calls is only 19,000 a month. As a consequence there were more than 121,000 calls abandoned.

Housing Repairs

Month	Average wait	No of calls	Calls answered	Calls abandoned	% answered	% abandoned
01/01/18	4m18s	7936	3979	3957	50.1	49.9
01/02/18	5m32s	7662	3645	4017	47.45	55.55
01/03/18	10m1s	9910	3331	6579	33.56	66.4
01/04/18	6m46s	7168	3090	4078	43.05	56.95
01/05/18	05m31s	6171	3095	3076	50.11	48.89
01/06/18	7m35s	5634	2433	3201	43.13	56.87
01/07/18	06m00s	5905	2848	3057	48.19	51.81
01/08/18	07m30s	6547	2927	3620	44.63	55.37
01/09/18	08m51s	6535	2614	3921	39.96	60.04
01/10/18	06m43s	6720	3621	3099	53.81	46.19
Totals	06m46s	70188	31583	38605	44.94	55.06

Housing Needs

Month	Average wait	No of calls	Calls answered	Calls abandoned	% answered	% abandoned
01/01/18	5m30s	4415	2710	1705	61.06	38.94
01/02/18	5m54s	4168	2492	1676	59.35	40.65
01/03/18	8m58s	5565	2423	3142	43.32	56.68
01/04/18	8m07s	4445	2269	2176	50.79	49.21
01/05/18	7m17s	4238	2431	1807	56.95	43.05
01/06/18	9m35s	3714	1871	1843	49.99	50.01
01/07/18	7m42s	3904	1982	1922	50.34	49.66
01/08/18	7m45s	3864	2173	1691	55.82	44.18
01/09/18	9m32s	3849	2000	1849	51.69	48.31
01/10/18	6m54s	3833	2293	1540	59.45	40.55
Totals	7m37s	41995	22644	19351	53.58	46.42