

Responses to the scrutiny questionnaire

What do you think of the council's call centre?

September 2007

This paper collates evidence received in response to a survey carried out for the overview & scrutiny committee as part of its review of the customer services centre (CSC).

The purpose of the survey was to invite views of the CSC, asking the questions:

- Have you used the customer service centre?
- What was your experience?
- Has the call centre improved the service you get from the council?
- Is the council responding to calls more efficiently?

The questionnaire was sent to councillors, community councils, tenants' and leaseholders' councils, tenants' and residents' associations, community and other local groups and was advertised in the press. 48 responses were received.

Responses

Councillors

1. "My references are exclusively about the Housing Repairs line although comments made about all parts of the facility are usually negative. Since the Call Centre was open I have heard one positive comment only from a resident. The main overall complaint is that you cannot communicate with the Council in any meaningful way. If Councils should be looking to working closely with residents and giving them much more influence as set out in the recent White Paper then the Call Centre has the opposite effect – distancing residents from accessible communication and feedback.

The number options given in the automatic response often do not match the issue that the caller wants to enquire about. E.g. You actually want to speak to the Tenancy Officer of your estate as there is an ongoing issue and the subject is not in the headings anyway.

As a councillor I use the Call Centre usually out of hours. It has always been a very frustrating experience.

I now refuse to agree to the Call Centre phoning me back as they never do.

There does not appear to be a Senior Housing Manager on duty to resolve "who does what" issues or negotiate through/give guidance etc. E.g. is it Thames Water or the Council that should be unblocking the particular drain in question.

The Call Centre Supervisors do not know the area. One I spoke to had been in the country one week. Apparently many are American. Of course I know that should not be a problem but I believe there are particular communication problems for Americans masked by a supposed common language. What residents are aware of is that this is not a service local to them with some basic knowledge e.g. The name of their estate is not familiar to the person on the end of the phone.

The lack of local knowledge leads to contractors being given wrong information causing delays. I have heard this from a local T&RA.

The answering service **always** says there are delays due to a high number of calls.

Often the phone is answered with a message listing blocks without water or heating. The implication is that if you live in one of these blocks the problem is known about. But the resident may have an immediate problem relating to this and this message is very off putting. To be followed by the words "welcome to Southwark Council" is to say the least totally dispiriting and gives an extremely negative impression of the Council."

(Councillor Veronica Ward)

2. "Case example:

07/09/06 – Environmental Customer Services (ECS) asked to remove three ownerless bins

13/09/06 - ECS passed request to Waste management team – "bins should be collected within 5 to 10 days" – two reference numbers given

27/09/06 – bins emptied – resident asked ECS to remove

29/09/06 – ECS updated – request with contractor – resident asked to "give this a few more days and come back to us again if there is anything outstanding"

06/10/06 – resident told ECS that bins still on street

16/10/06 – resident chased up ECS (had received no response to email of 06/10/06)

26/10/06 – resident emailed ECS again (had no response to previous two emails)

27/10/06 – ECS replied saying system showed both earlier requests as closed – follow-ups raised with Waste Management Team

05/11/06 – resident updated ECS that one of bins still remained on street

15/11/06 – resident passed correspondence to ward councillor”

(Case example provided by Councillor Nick Vineall)

Neighbourhood Forum

3. “I am writing to your good-selves as chairman (of neighbourhood forum) and on behalf of the neighbourhood which we represent.

We found the call centre is a shambles, you do not want me to go on about what is wrong with the call centre. There is only one good thing about the centre – that is the free phone number. All the complaints you hear about the centre are right.

Your tenants from this forum including myself met with the centre manager at the One Stop Shop Walworth for about two hours, and tried to tell him what is wrong with the call centre. He did listen, and we hope there will be some action about our many concerns with services we are getting. And I know we speak for most of Southwark Council’s tenants and leaseholders.

The One Stop Shop was also set up by Pearsons PLC who are a big publishing company who are out to make a profit. There is nothing wrong with this if the service they give works properly. We had a great service before this which worked very well.”

Tenants’ & Residents’ Associations

4. “Find 60%-50% of the time the operator will not give out a reference number – which you are entitled to as this is a record of your call and reported repair.

Also, reported repairs will go missing – when informing the call centre that the repair is still unrepaired. This happens 50% of the time.

Also found on 3 or 4 occasions when on estate walkabouts with council officer – when going through repairs list, repairs have been reported as completed! When in actual fact they haven’t been touched by the contractor. But the contractor has said they have done this.

Unfortunately, found operators fail to call back with reference numbers, when they say they will, or fail to understand what you are talking about!

The other 40% of call centre operators are very helpful and productive. The other 50%/60% let this 40% down, making the system itself come across as being impolite and difficult to use.”

5. “The call centre is appalling, you have almost an hour’s wait to get through then they do not know where your estate is. Then they give you a reference for a repair, then this job never gets done.

It's the worst system that Southwark Council has ever introduced. I don't know anyone who has a good word to say about it.

Go back to the old system where you used to be able to liaise with your neighbourhood office. It was more personal and you got better results."

6. "This service is not good enough – as tenants we are suffering. Before the changes it was not perfect but it worked better than it does now. Recently I had to call three days to be able to put a report for the tenants' hall. The majority of the staff are unable to find tenants' halls so they cannot raise jobs. And you are always told someone will call you later – this never happens. There is still a language problem. I reported a problem for a tenant and was cut off the telephone three times. Waited with the tenant from 7.30pm until 12.45 pm for a call-out. Same tenant had a visit on 27th September after a report to the call centre several times. She was told by the workman he will be putting a report in. She is still waiting for the job to be done. There are many more incidents."
7. As Chair of (TRA) we have had lots of tenants complaining about the call centre at our meetings. Also I have had bad experiences from the call centre. I don't think the staff are getting enough training and have a lot to learn about customer care, not all staff but I have had trouble with rudeness on evening calls and for what this centre is costing we should be getting a better service."
8. "I don't think very much of the call centre when you leave a message with them and you get no response from whoever you want.

I called on 29 December asking for a repair due to not being able to turn off heating and having to sit with all the windows open because the flat was so hot and being a pensioner I felt overcome with the heat. I explained all this to the person I was speaking to. I was told to be in as someone would call between 12 – 6pm. No-one came. So with heat blazing and windows open I had to suffer all weekend and had to call again on 2 January. Where is the eco-friendly Southwark when this is happening apart from me sitting here waiting?"

9. "I am the chair of (TRA) and have only rung the call centre twice this year for repairs queries at my own address. Both times calls were answered swiftly and efficiently.

The problems appeared when I acted on behalf of other residents or rang regarding general repairs for the estate. I was given the impression that the operators had never heard of Tenants Associations before and it took some time for me to explain the situation.

Other tenants have not been happy with the call centre set up, stating that calls are answered after a long time and then there were no follow up on the problem.

Communication appears to be another problem with some operators having strong accents and elderly people cannot always understand what is being said.

The majority of people do not like to report problems this way, prefer a face to face contact but cannot get to the neighbourhood office.

Personally things were better before when there were more neighbourhood areas and we came under the responsibility of (Housing Office).”

10. “Abysmal. Recently I tried to get a neighbour’s hot water boiler repaired and after numerous delays I resorted to phoning the heating contractors myself. There seems to be poor communication between call centre and contractors carrying out repairs.”

11. “I am writing to you as the secretary of (T&RA) and as a member of the (Area Housing Forum).

A couple of months ago at a forum meeting the question of the call centre was raised. Without exception all the assembled delegates spoke of how inefficient the call centre was, how difficult it was to get in touch with a member of staff at (Housing Office) using the call centre, and how unreliable the centre was in passing on messages to individual officers working at (Housing Office).

When a delegate finally got through to the call centre you were either passed from one person to another, or your call would be cut off and you would have to start all over again.

A great deal of criticisms was directed towards the councillors who were in attendance, and they were asked to explain why this call centre had been set up in the first place when quite obviously the call centre just did not work properly. In view of this criticism the management of (Housing Office) were asked to supply all the delegates with the direct line telephone numbers of all the tenancy managers working at (Housing Office) so that in future officers could be contacted without using the call centre at all.

The delegates at all forum meetings are always the secretaries and chairs of all the local T&RAs who in their normal duties, whilst working for their individual T&RA, do not want to spend a lot of time and money trying to contact a tenancy manager by going through the council’s customer service centre.”

12. “I have called twice about the same problem – explained everything – had to call back – got a different person – had to explain whole thing again.

Operatives are totally unfamiliar with property types/estates they deal with.

It would work much better if operators were split into patches and then trained on estates/types of properties on their patch.

Also, what is not a priority to the person taking the call might be a real concern to the tenant. One of my tenants (76 years old) had to phone 5 times because the light outside her door was out.”

13. "It has improved of late from feedback I get from residents.

What people require of the service I am not sure because personally I have found staff pleasant and helpful.

I think people do not appreciate the volume of calls dealt with never having seen a call centre."

14. "I think the service is a complete waste of our money. Considering this contract is costing us £10million per year I would have expected a much more competent team of staff to have been trained and in place by now – 18 months to 2 years into this 10 year contract!!

The service was much better when tenants could call their local office and speak with a member of the repairs team. Tenants were confident that their problems had been reported and could speak to an officer who would understand what they were talking about. This is not the case with the staff at the call centre.

It was not broken but someone decided to fix it anyway!! Now look what we have – a £100million bill for an absolute shambles. This is not good enough."

15. "We think the call centre is a waste of time and money. You have to sit there for about half an hour listening to music before anybody does anything. We have a tenant who phoned there on Monday 20 November 2006, got no reply at all, she had to run down to the office to report it, where she was told, you are not the first tenant to report this to us. The tenant was in quite a state as it was her boiler that was leaking. She has been without hot water and heating for five and a half days – and she is a pensioner."

16. "Most of the complaints from tenants at our meetings are about the call centre.

As the chair person I had 5 calls on Saturday 4 November that the call centre line was not working. I tried the number and found this to be true. I did report this at the next (Forum) meeting. I was told they had fire drill – how long does it take?

This call centre just doesn't seem to be working. I could think of a lot better things this money could be used for.

Also, people were put on the phones after just one week's training. This was told to us by a worker at the call centre, at Southwark Conference this year, we were in the call centre workshop."

17. "The centre will not forward you to an extension number so officers sending letters quoting extension numbers are of no use. If an officer needs a response to a letter then a direct line number is needed.

T&RAs should have a direct line approach to officers to acknowledge the interest T&RAs have in helping the council to function.

Over the time of the call centre's existence it has improved – calls are answered quicker and telephonists are more pleasant and approachable.”

18. “Very satisfied with call centre enquiries but follow up by repair team very bad.

The call centre has been very helpful with the problem at (address).

On August 8 2006 the tenant booked to have her kitchen done. Beginning of October she had a phone call telling her to clear the kitchen, someone would be there at 12 o'clock. No-one came. 5 phone calls to Southwark Direct it was once again booked for October 19 all day. No-one came. At the tenants' forum meeting the area manager said he would look into it. The outcome: November 1 all day, at 2pm a workman arrived to say the list of work he had been given was so long he could not do her kitchen, he would have to be in touch with his boss and ring her, nothing since. It is not the call centre that needs checking on as they have been helpful but the follow-up contractors.”

19. “Please urgently scrap this call centre for its time wasting and too unproductive to quickly address needs of clients. There is no free access number.”

20. “As chair of my T&RA we receive complaints on a regular basis concerning the call centre. Just this morning I personally rang to find out why the heating and hot water had once again been switched off on the (estate). The message said that there could be a wait of up to 15 minutes to speak with somebody – after about 4 or 5 I was cut off.

It is a terribly shoddy service that has never improved.”

21. “Please do close this unhelpful and wasteful call centre and use One Stop Shop and Council NHO for all call services.”

22. “When it was announced at (Community Council) meeting that this review is taking place the entire room erupted. I know that Tenants' Council and (Area Housing Forum) have passed resolutions re the horrendous service since the call centre came into service.

Specific examples of the incompetence now in operation:

- Extremely expensive to call due to length of time left holding
- Many cases where staff do not understand problem, therefore wrong job and priority created, therefore job taking longer to solve at higher cost due to incorrect data
- Many cases where housing have proved call centre has not passed on jobs and tenants have proved that they have reported job correctly
- Pearsons' brief is to satisfy shareholders which is in direct conflict with providing good service to residents

- Contractor state – they get too many jobs also not enough detail so do not know what problem is and when they turn up have problem with tenants as a result”

Tenant Management Organisation

23. “When you call to report a repair you can wait for at least 10-15 minutes to get through to an operator. As an example of the service received, I called on 16/10/06 to report that one to the lifts in the block did not open on the second floor. When I got through the operator was very pleasant, gave me a ref: (reference number) and said someone would call that day. On the 25/10/06 I made another call about same problem, ref (different reference number) and was told it would be repaired that day. On the 03/11/06 I tried to call again and got fed up waiting so I thought I would email. I got a reply on 13/11/06 this time with ref (different reference number) to say it would be done immediately. I have been to check the lift today 15/11/06 and it has still not been repaired. Copy of emails enclosed. I do not think this is good customer services and I do not expect to wait 10 days for a response to an e-mail.

This is just one example there have been other problems that tenants have encountered.”

Individuals (tenants, leaseholders, customers)

24. “At times computer “down” so unable to give information. Also unable to give a reference number at times to check back on. Feedback is a problem. Sunday 25 November 2006 – long waiting time – 15 minutes – to renew library books. In principle the idea is good – but long recorded messages become a bit tedious if repeated too often. Doubtless the council is probably in a no win situation i.e. damned if you do damned if you don’t.”
25. “Some calls have been dealt with promptly and efficiently. Others have not been e.g. a repair requested in March still not finally resolved in November, partly due to call centre telling me that they would not deal with it and did not. The call centre is not able to deal with calls relating to defects in smoke alarms or repairs and/or suggest any other source of help to me. This is important to fire safety. Calls made re pest control to call centre – they appeared not to have full details in order to deal with these enquiries.”
26. “I have used the call centre many times.

Observations:

1. The telephonists spend an extraordinary length of time typing in your details – why? I imagine they are not skilled in this area. So you are kept waiting on the phone for ever which is time consuming and annoying.

2. To make matters worse they invariably get all the fundamentals wrong so you have to repeat the process again at a later date – this happens far too often.

So, conclusion, the system doesn't work and never has done. Wise up!"

27. "Transfer to wrong people/department

Too many options in option menu

Wrong classification, routine/emergency, therefore a resident was unable to answer the visit

Occasional unsatisfactory response"

28. "I think the call centre is one of the worst services Southwark Council has embarked on.

I phoned to report a repair; the person who attended to me first of all said it was not their responsibility to do the repair because my estate is under a management organisation. I told him we were now under Southwark Council. He went off the phone for about 10 minutes to speak to someone, and then came back to say he couldn't find any information on who was supposed to do the repair. I told him it was Southwark Council. Then he went off again and came back to say money had been allocated to our estate management to cover repairs and I should talk to our caretaker. I asked what was the name and phone number of the caretaker. Then he went off again and came back to say all tenants had been given that information and he had not got the name of the person. I asked if I could speak to my estate officer. He then said I had to redial again – and that call went through to the call centre again. You know the rest of the story – half an hour later and still no positive result."

29. "There is no accountability. It is extremely hard to get a name of somebody you have been speaking to, especially when they are rude to you.

Actually getting answered can take up to 45 minutes – this is totally unacceptable.

The pre-recorded message on the "call-waiting" that details works on estates borough-wide is frustrating. You finally get through only to be faced with a list of on-going works. Sometimes this can take 5 minutes or so.

I have got the feeling that some call centre staff really have no idea – no care – no customer care. I have cried in frustration when trying to explain a situation of flooding and asking for specific flood prevention machinery – only to be told not to tell the call centre staff how to do their job – meanwhile I have torrential water exploding through a ceiling! I felt sick and when I asked for the operator's name he told me he didn't have to give it.

I think call centres in the main are a particularly bad idea – especially when old age pensioners are involved. SSWark Council is putting issues further and further out of the reach of its tenants – not good!”

30. “Operators do not know where council employees work or how to contact them. Callers are often left listening to ringing phones with no return to the switchboard.

The repairs number doesn’t seem to work after office hours. Callers have been left hanging on, listening to a dialling tone.

Callers find it difficult to get through to the repairs number at all times. They are passed to another number and listen to music for as long as an hour.

One of our members’ phoned the repairs number, was asked for her number, and told someone would ring back. They didn’t. We are also concerned that people are asked for their numbers in such circumstances. Several of our members’ numbers are unlisted and they are understandably concerned about security.”

31. “On several occasions I have used SSWark Council’s call centre to speak to someone, e.g. (officer) on a repair. This has been a very arduous experience as I have either waited a long time listening to the various options or been put through to the wrong place, where I was only to be told that they would type up/email my message to the required place/person.”

32. “You say it is a 24 hour service – I have just been told at 7.50am that the switchboard is closed.

Too many options and repeated.

Calling about lights out on walkway outside my flat I was told, “We don’t take repair calls from leaseholders” – and had to insist to the unwilling call centre person.”

33. “Last December I reported two damp patches – one in the sitting room and one in the kitchen – to your call centre. After being told to call three further numbers and after 13 calls I finally had a visitor. She had made two earlier appointments but always managed to arrive on the wrong date.

I assume she made an order for both repairs, but only one (the lesser one) was carried out. I do not know why this should be but still the repair in the sitting room has not been completed.”

34. “I had cause to use the call centre when I had a leak from the vacant property above me. I was supposed to have a call back but didn’t receive one. So I called again at midday only to find that someone had already been to the property and was waiting for me to go to my property. Although the call was answered quickly, not satisfied with feedback.”

35. "I have received a letter from (Officer) dated 22 November after I had brought to the Council's attention the unsatisfactory service I had received following the report of a missed garden waste recycling collection. In his letter (Officer) addresses the issue of the missed collection (new members of the crew were being trained and they have been 'severely reprimanded' about their behaviour).

However, my complaint was not so much about the fact that a collection was missed but rather about what followed - namely that I had to make seven phone calls to your offices in an attempt to get the matter rectified with no success. My original letter set out the full details. It is this that I would like an explanation for.

At the same time perhaps you could let me know why my 'complaint' has taken so long to be dealt with. I wrote initially on 3 August, followed up by email on 11 September, had a response saying my complaint was being passed to (Officer) on 2 October and finally received a response last week - 16 weeks after my initial letter.

I saw an advert in the local paper recently entitled "What do you think of Southwark's call centre". I am copying this letter to the Scrutiny Team to let them know of my experience."

36. "I received your questionnaire about the council's call centre in a SAVO mailing. It arrived after 20 November, so I could not respond in time for your meeting on that date but I assume scrutiny of services is ongoing.

I am responding about one incident. On Friday 10 November, our garden waste recycling was not collected. Since we had put out several bags, as had some neighbours, I wanted to report this to waste management so that they would collect it.

On Monday 13 November I telephoned 020 7525 2000 and asked to be put through to waste management. I was not transferred but given another number to dial. This number gave an 'unavailable' tone (sorry, I have not kept a note of the number). So far, not good, and I gave up telephoning.

I then went to the council's website and used the e-mail option there for reporting missed collections, which was easy to fill in and send. The bags were removed early the next morning, so I was very pleased with that service. However, not everyone has internet access."

37. "Do you mean by call centre the 7525 2000 number? If yes I have used that quite a lot.

For environmental things it is improved from what it was before, though that is a combined effect with the excellent response from (Officer) and the Street Leaders Scheme.

Sometimes when I ring 7572 5000 to ask to be put through to a particular department, I am put through to what seems like a call centre which frequently puts me through to the wrong department, and is frustrating and worse. I have had a very poor response in trying to get through to electoral services, constitutional unit, members services, housing HO.

The operators don't seem to know what or where these places are, whereas the former switchboard response generally seemed to know about them.

At one stage I was told we couldn't ring directly to Planning Officers which was ludicrous. This was so even when we had a meeting with them to arrange! That weird approach seems to have stopped now but please don't let that get back into the system.

In answering this questionnaire, I have realised that while I know where I am with 7525 2000 and the service is reasonable, I have no idea what call centre I am being put through to by 7525 5000, and whether it is the 2000 place or something different. More transparency about how and where the calls are being transferred and handled would help."

38. "Awful. I have tried to use it many times. No-one rings back. Complaints aren't logged. So every time I have to go through the problem with a new person. You can't ring the person dealing with the problem directly. It is a big step backwards."
39. "As a Southwark Council tenant, I am very concerned that there is no effective way of communicating with the Council as all enquiries are filtered through the Housing and Tenancy line and one can no longer speak to the Area Housing Office. This has been highlighted in my case by an enquiry made in April of this year into the possibility of having a water meter fitted in my flat. I had a letter from (Repairs Manager) on 25th April saying he would get back to me with a response in 10 working days. Since then I have repeatedly rung the Housing line and am constantly assured "someone will ring me back". Seven months down the line, I am no nearer an answer on this matter.

This is a relatively simple query. I am very concerned that if the call centre does not even work on this level, how will queries that are a little more complicated and require a dialogue between tenant and Council fare? The Housing line is fine as a one way conduit channelling requests to the Housing Offices, but there seems to be no way to either get a response from or speak directly to the appropriate person who actually deals with the problem. This may conveniently shield staff at the Housing Offices from phone calls, but it makes bringing a problem to a conclusion almost impossible.

Having been a council tenant for about 24 years, I can say that the current system is possibly the worst that the Council has used. I would be very grateful if you could raise this issue of the Call Centre, as it is the prime means of communication with the Council for those who work full-time, like myself, and cannot easily go to a One Stop Shop."

40. "I complained about the standard of service I received when I attempted to telephone Southwark Local History Library (SLHL) on Monday 6 March after the Customer Service Centre (CSC) had started operating. The CSC would not put me through to the SLHL to answer what would for them have been a simple question. When the SLHL telephoned me back my question had been jumbled and was difficult to understand, thus wasting their time.

I complained to Southwark Council and I received a reply dated 20 April in which it was admitted that the CSC use for SLHL was unsuitable and that an option was to be investigated that included a direct telephone line. There appears to have been no change in the problem and the SLHL still cannot deal with enquiries made of it to the high standard that was enjoyed prior to the introduction of the CSC.

It seems to me that Southwark Council has no due regard to its library service, the local history library in particular, to the morale of its library staff, or to the quality of its service to the public. The staff at SLHL work tirelessly to maintain their high standards. Southwark Council seems content to be viewed as an object of ridicule and contempt in its delay to revert to a system which worked well for SLHL.

What a pity not all people outside Southwark can visit SLHL and consequently they may be left with the wrong impression of SLHL because of the continued use of the CSC for their enquiries. I would suggest the restoration of the direct telephone line to SLHL as a matter of urgency."

41. "I saw in the local paper a request for views on Southwark's call centre.

I have used it many times during the year, mostly to book bulk refuse collections or report missed collections of refuse / recycling. It drives me nuts sometimes, it all depends on the quality of the particular person who deals with your problem, sometimes it is very efficient and other times it is so frustrating, because the person dealing with you is not working for the department you wish to talk to, and therefore is not an expert in that particular field, they are just reading back to you whatever comes up on their screen. The call centre is basically nothing more than a message centre, and if the person dealing with you makes a mistake is the message you wish to leave for the department you really want to talk to then a small problem can take days and days and days to sort out, that has happened a lot this year.

Why is it never possible to talk directly to the actual relevant department?
There are no direct lines available to Southwark residents; we always have to go through this call centre. Why is there not a manager available in the call centre who can take over a problem call at the callers request and who has the authority to call the relevant department direct to talk to someone with actual knowledge of that field?

Why is it not a freephone number? I have spent a lot of money just hanging on in queues, it was cheaper before to keep trying and always get an engaged tone than to waste money now just listen to that voice telling me how valuable

my call is to Southwark. If it was valuable, you would allow us to contact the correct department direct.”

42. “I had occasion to use the call centre in early November of this year when a catastrophic flood occurred in the fourth floor flat above us.

Unfortunately, the response from the call centre was extremely disappointing, and I believe that the delay caused by the reception of the call taken by the call centre resulted in huge costs and inconvenience for ourselves as leaseholders and for other tenants and leaseholders who were affected by the flood, not to mention the council itself which may now need to pay for higher insurance costs.

I called the call centre about 1:10 pm in the afternoon on a Tuesday, to report the flood as an emergency. There being no 'emergency' number aside from the regular repairs line, I was forced to wait on hold for several minutes (at least five, possibly more). Once I finally got through, the operator needed to go through a number of steps to log the call, and was not able to send anyone out immediately and then take the details. I was told that the response time was 'up to two hours', which is much too long for the type of emergency we were experiencing. In the end, the heavily gushing water was not shut off for almost two hours, and by then all five flats from all storeys had been heavily inundated. The flat which had had the explosive leak had been under almost a foot of water, and our flat was in many areas under up to two inches of water. In our flat alone, all of the ceilings and most walls and floors will need to be redecorated, with an estimated claim value of up to £10,000. It was only because I happened to be working at home that day that I was able to save most of our possessions (including three computers which were in the room receiving the worst of the water). At seven and a half months pregnant, I was forced to move heavy electronic equipment around the flat, turn off the electricity and spend two hours attempting to keep the water level on the floor down with pots, pans and towels. After the flood, we were without electricity in half the flat for almost two weeks. We now face up to two months of drying time, complete with loud fans and dehumidifiers, and may have to move out for up to two weeks shortly after the birth of our first child in order for the redecoration to take place.

A Southwark housing employee happens to live on our estate and although he was not working at that moment, he saw what was happening and contacted the Borough & Bankside housing office directly. I believe that it may have been due to his intervention that someone finally came to shut off the water, and it is likely also due to him that an electrician was sent to 'make safe' the flats. Even though it was myself who had reported the flood, the electrician 'did not have a record' of our flat and without my request would not have made our flat safe, which would have caused great inconvenience as we would have had to attempt to organise an electrician ourselves, with no power in the flat to help us access such a resource.

I feel that the huge delay in sending out a professional to deal with the emergency, despite my being extremely clear about its extent, has contributed to the massive amount of damage sustained by all five flats.

Clearly, the call centre did not function as desired in this instance.

In sum,

- There is no number to which 'real' emergencies can be reported
- The waiting time for calls to be intercepted is unreasonable, especially in an emergency
- The call centre format does not allow for flexibility in dealing with an emergency in a prompt manner
- It is debatable whether the call centre actually functioned in this case, or whether the help received was due to the lucky presence of a knowledgeable Southwark employee who happened to be on site
- The making safe of a badly affected flat was not organised properly and there seemed to be no communication with regards to which flats were affected and how the professionals sent to deal with the scene should proceed

I am not against the concept of a call centre, but would like to see one which is responsive, flexible and functional.”

43. “I have found it virtually impossible to speak to anyone in my housing office. All calls now go through to the Southwark Call Centre, where you have to leave a message for them to pass it on to the relevant person by email.

I have on several occasions spoken to various customer service reps at the call centre and left several messages for (housing officer) after writing to him and not receiving a reply. My question to (the housing officer) is a simple one which would take a matter of minutes for him to answer but yet it is being pro-longed because of this new process.

Residents should be able to speak to someone within their housing office, as people who work do not have the time to go down there in person. Not even an email address can be given. Why? I feel this system needs to be looked at and revised in some way as I'm sure I am not the only resident that feels dissatisfied and frustrated!”

Voluntary Organisations

44. “I have had several bad experiences which have put me off using the call centre.

In September I rang to find out more about plastics recycling and had had my call answered but then was cut off without the information.

I had used it twice before. Once they were helpful, but on another occasion I spoke to a call centre worker who was rude and unhelpful – they seemed to be a gate keeper preventing the public from getting information.

Actually, on another occasion, I was given the wrong information about communicating with environmental health; as a worker I eventually found another way to get through, which I would have been unlikely to do as a resident.

I cannot recommend the call centre to the public.”

45. “Unfortunately to date I have not found the call centre effective. Fortunately, given our role and relationships across Southwark I normally have the direct number for the officer that I need or can source who I should be talking to through other council officers. However on those occasions that I have not known these details and have needed to rely on the call centre, I have found it frustrating with it taking many transfers before I get the right person to access the right information – on other occasions this doesn’t happen at all and the line simply goes dead and the caller is left hanging.

As a membership organisation we have a great deal of direct contact with our members. A number of them have also indicated their frustration as they have tried to contact the appropriate officer and have had to battle their way through this system.

I can only imagine that is also incredibly frustrating for Council Officers who are there to offer a service to the community and are finding that there are yet more barriers for users at a time when the council is advocating that is keen to *reduce* barriers and make officers more obtainable.

In summary I find the system flawed – another unnecessary layer or administration. At a time when many council departments are advocating to keep their budgets at the same level, personally I would have thought that the no doubt considerable cost of setting up this ‘call centre’ and implementing it might have been better spent elsewhere.”

46. “I use the call centre at least every week, usually for housing repair or environmental services for my service users. My calls are usually answered promptly, the staff are helpful, they have good customer skills, on occasion I have had to be transferred for more specialised enquiries and I have been impressed on the speed and efficient service.

However on some occasions I have not been able to get past menu despite following prompts and even when I tried main switchboard they couldn't help either, the last time was 6th July 06 in the morning.”

47. “I find the call centre quite difficult and time-consuming, compared to other local authorities’ receptions/switchboard systems. Firstly, it would be much quicker to get through immediately to the department and the section/team you wanted to, rather than explain your purpose to the call centre. The call centre staff

have (mainly) been polite and try to be helpful, but easily become frustrated and impatient – especially if it is a complex/unusual query, or one that involves a response from different departments (which I would have preferred to call myself, individually, if I'd had access to the telephone numbers). You get the sense that the staff have been told to dissuade people from getting through to the individual/team who is responsible for the particular service you need to discuss – and this is quite annoying, especially in an accountable, local government. I'd very much like a return to a normal main switchboard and telephone numbers for departments/teams/individuals to be available, either through the switchboard or on the website. In addition, I have had several experiences where it has taken up to 20 minutes for the call to be answered.”

Property Management Company

48. “I am responding to the request for comments about experiences with Southwark’s Call Centre. I am the Operations Manager for a property management company. Many of our clients are leaseholder of council properties in your borough, so I have quite a bit of experience with using the call centre for repairs and maintenance issues.

On a positive note the individual call handlers are usually polite but overall my impression is that the service is poor when compared with both the previous system and with other boroughs

First, when you ring the call centre, you are put on hold for quite a long time. I have been on hold for up to 20 minutes before someone answers. There is a message while you are on hold which informs you that you do have the option to email your repair or query, but I find this almost useless as the response time for an email can take up to two weeks, and sometimes not at all. I did use emails for a time, but I found that I had to ring to follow up as no response was received. When you finally do get a hold of someone in the call centre they say that they have no access to emails as that is handled by another department. All in all, that seems to be the main experience throughout the process; it is handled by a different department, so you are transferred to one person after another and you have to explain the situation all over again each time. The absence of both a tracking system and any concept of personal responsibility is a major source of frustration.

Once a repair is lodged, it is sent to a contractor, at which point the council chooses to wash their hands of the repair. If a contractor does not show up, or does not do the repair, it is up to us (the customer) to contact the contractors. I find this a bit confusing as they are the council’s contractors and they are employed by the council, so the reasoning behind why we should have to chase them is beyond me. In my experience, it is best to keep the number of people or companies involved to a minimum, and to make sure that the tenant or leaseholder is dealing with only one contact. Sometimes the repairs are completed, but a lot of the time it is a major repair, in which case the contractors have to send a quotation to the housing office. We are then at the mercy of the NHO as we are not able to contact them directly anymore due to

the change in the telephone system. The repair centre is also not able to contact the NHO directly. I believe emails are used, but are rarely answered.

I could go on and on about the problems I have had, but I think the main point I am trying to make is that the call centre system needs to be completely reviewed and changed. The computer system is down much of the time and the cross-referencing between the council and their contractors is non-existent.

As the largest freeholder in London with 13,000 leaseholders Southwark has both the opportunity and the responsibility to define the standard for call handling systems used by councils. In the meantime I look forward to hearing what you intend to do about improving the existing system.”