



Meeting Date: February 26, 2025

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Report No: CPS-07-2025

Subject: Middlesex Centre Customer Service Overview, 2024

Recommendation:

THAT Report CPS-07-2025 entitled “Middlesex Centre Customer Service Overview, 2024” be received for information.

Purpose:

To provide Council with an overview of customer service at Middlesex Centre throughout 2024.

Background:

In 2022, Middlesex Centre undertook a Customer Service Review with funding through the Government of Ontario’s Provincial Modernization Grant. Blackline Consulting was contracted to complete the work.

Linked to the review, Middlesex Centre developed and implemented a new Customer Services Policy and Procedure in January 2023. The policy directs Corporate Services to bring a report to council each year highlighting customer service at the municipality.

This is the second report under the new policy. It is broken into three sections:

1. Customer Service by the Numbers
2. Customer Service Feedback
3. Responses to the Recommendations in the Customer Service Review

One: Customer Service by the Numbers

The following provides a sense of the number of customer service interactions each year. It focuses on the general (service area) first points of contact at the office. These numbers should be considered with that in mind – they do not reflect calls or emails that go directly to a specific staff member’s phone or in-box, nor do they reflect the day-to-day interactions of building inspectors, community services staff, and others with members of the public. That is to say, they do not represent all the customer service interactions at the municipality.

a) Phone Calls to General Lines

(Data for phone calls into the office is from 2023.)

In 2023, Middlesex Centre received an average of 1,441 calls per week – or just under 75,000 per year (all phone lines).

The municipality has general lines for most service areas. In 2023, the main line to the office received more than 12,600 calls. The community services booking desk line (7,200), the building services main line (5,800) and the public works and engineering main line (3,200) received several thousands calls each. The fire services main line, water bill inquiries and property tax inquiries also received over 1,300 calls each in 2023.

It is important to note that these numbers do not capture the complexity of the calls, nor do they capture all the customer calls made directly to staff within each department.

b) Customer Service Front Desk Tracking

Municipal staff tracked the nature of the requests received at the front desk throughout the year.

Of note in their tracking:

- 69% of calls to the front desk were related to tax and water inquiries.
- An average of 157 people per month visited the front desk in person during the year. This number varies significantly from week-to-week, with particularly busy periods during tax time, etc. With front desk staff located at the Komoka Wellness Centre in 2024, front desk responded to more general inquires about the arena than would occur at the main office.
- 41% of walk-in customers were there to pay a bill.
- Of the calls received, front desk staff answered or resolved 73%, with the remaining forwarded to other staff members. Similarly, 61% of emails coming through the main customer service address were answered or resolved by front desk staff.

c) Emails to Generic Accounts

Middlesex Centre uses generic email accounts such as water@middlesexcentre.ca and customerservice@middlesexcentre.ca to provide residents and businesses with an easy-to-use address to contact municipal departments directly.

In 2024, these email boxes received over 18,000 messages. To get to this number, staff selected two 5-week periods, Jan. 29 to Mar. 3 and Sept. 22 to Oct. 26, and extrapolated the data to the full year. The busiest accounts were:

- Facility Booking - 230 per month
- Customer Service - 163 per month
- Property Taxes - 125 per month

Public works, water billing and office of the clerk also received more than 70 emails per month each. It should be noted that the total about includes the accounts payable email, which includes external and internal requests for processing payments. In 2023, that email address received over 650 emails per month.

d) Web / Online Forms

In addition to the Cloudpermit (building/planning), Univerus (recreation) and Citywide (municipal property concerns) systems, residents and business owners can provide feedback and request municipal services through online webforms. The website features several forms for everything from making a by-law complaint to requesting a fire prevention presentation to ordering dog tags. There are also several fillable PDF forms for various services.

Last year, about 145 requests per month were made via webform. The most popular forms were:

- Request Email Billing – 57 submissions per month
- Dog Tag Application – 21 submissions per month
- Feedback/Complaint/Service Request – 17 submissions per month*
- Request a New Water Account – 12 submissions per month
- Request to Close a Water Account (Final Meter Read) – 10 submissions per month
- By-Law Complaint Form – 8 submissions per month

Incoming requests through webforms are treated as any customer service request, with customers receiving an immediate “pop-up” message acknowledging the receipt of their submission, and then additional follow-up as their request requires.

**Implementation of the Citywide Citizen Portal*

In September 2024, the municipality switched from a forms-based service request (“report a concern”) to use the integrated reporting options afforded by Citywide, Middlesex Centre’s asset management system. Users go to the Middlesex Centre website and link from there to report concerns about parks, facilities, roads, and other municipal assets.

Between September and the end of the year, the Citywide system received 92 submissions directly from residents of which:

- 10.87% were related to parks and facilities;
- 7.61% were related to water/wastewater, and
- 81.52% were related to roads.

Requests were logged from across the municipality:

- Ilderton, 27.17%
- Rural, 22.83%
- Komoka, 19.57%
- Kilworth, 13.04%
- Delaware, 9.78%
- Arva, 5.43%
- Birr, 1.09%
- Bryanston, 1.09%

The direct nature of these requests – once entered, they are automatically forwarded to the appropriate department – and the 24/7 availability of the system has resulted in quick response times.

Two: Customer Service Feedback

a) Feedback from Public

One of the recommendations in the Customer Service Review was to conduct regular surveys to gauge residents' satisfaction with the customer service offered by the municipality. To keep costs down, municipal staff have opted to include questions about customer service with the annual budget survey and will conduct a more complete survey once every four years.

The following summarizes the responses received to the customer service questions posed in the 2025 budget survey.

Survey Background

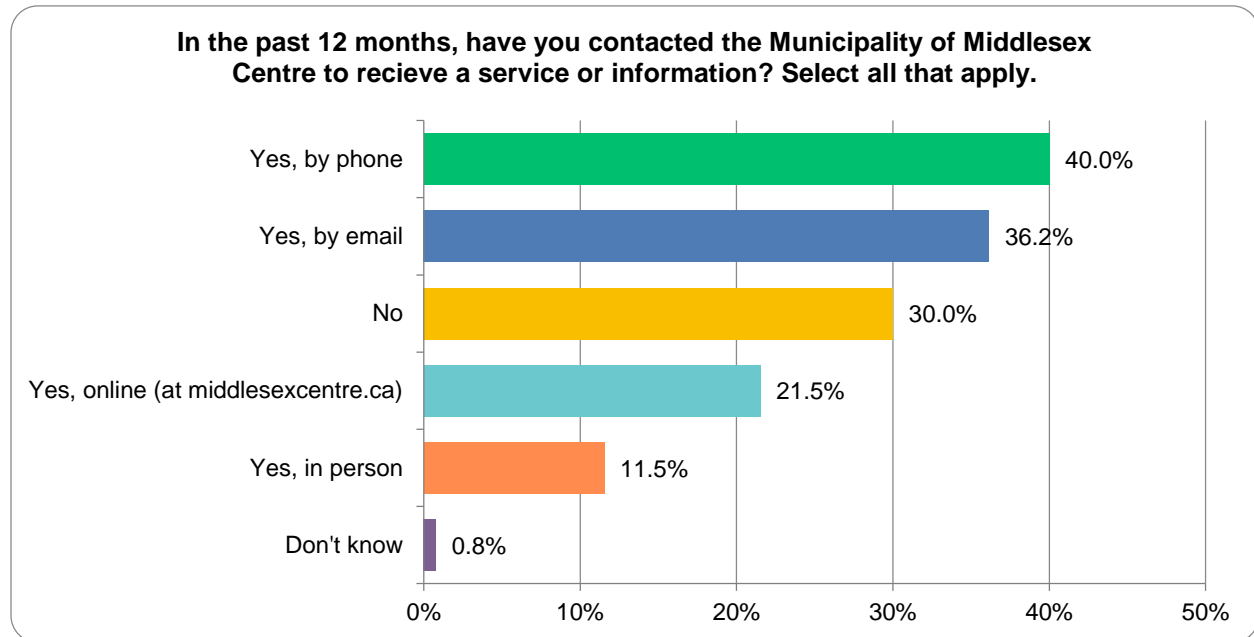
As part of the 2025 Budget Survey, which ran in July and August of 2024, respondents were given an option to answer additional questions about Middlesex Centre customer service. Of the 395 overall respondents, 137 opted to complete the additional questions.

The customer service questions mimicked the questions asked as part of the Customer Service Review survey in May 2022 and in 2023 as part of the budget survey. Data from these surveys is provided for comparison purposes. It should be noted that comparisons are based on limited data.

Feedback received from this survey is used by staff to identify customer service training needs, changes to procedures, and future program changes.

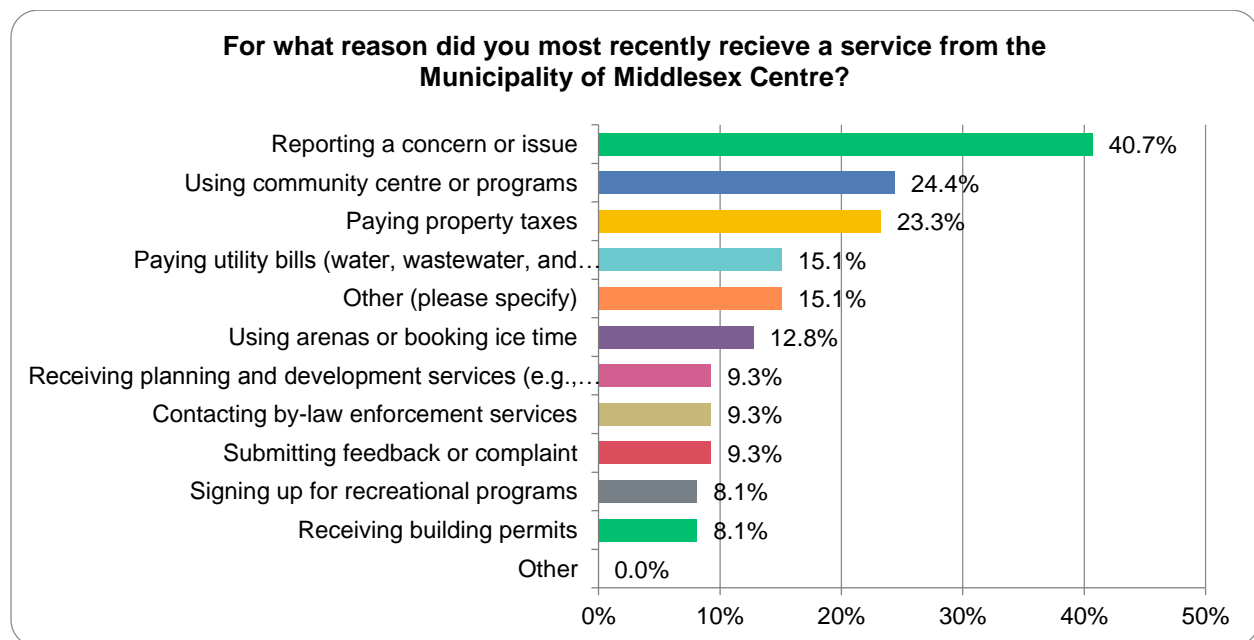
Survey Responses Received

Question 1 – How Services have been Accessed



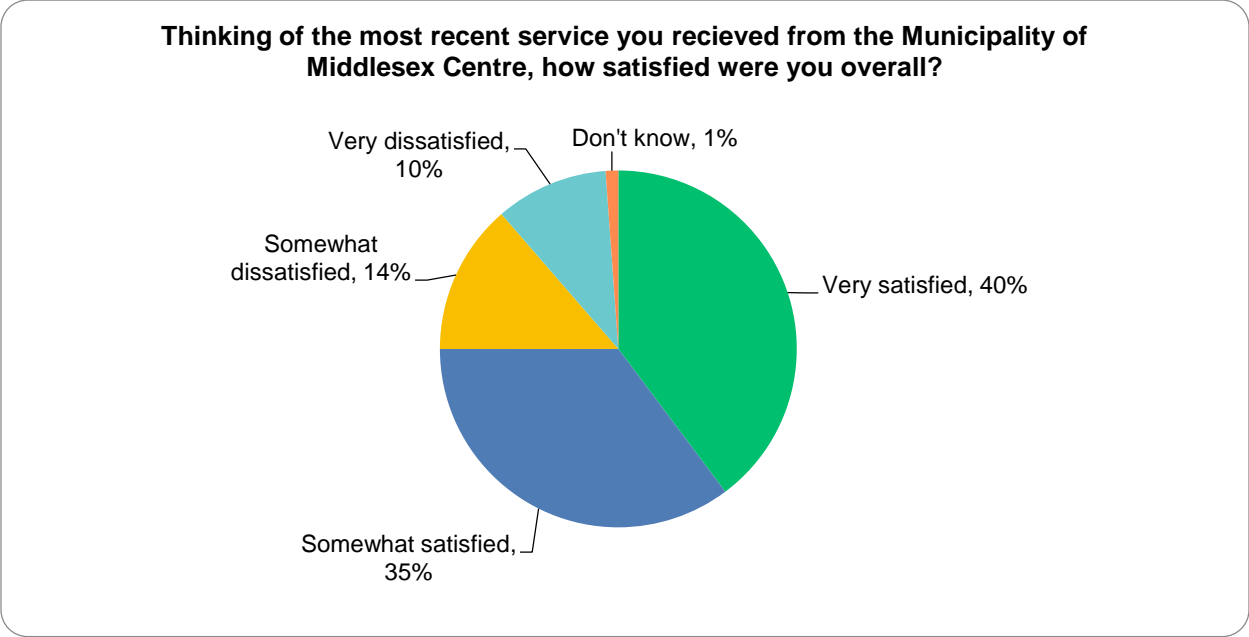
This compares favorably with the 2022 and 2023 surveys, which found, “Phone and email are the most common and preferred contact methods to reach the Municipality.”

Question 2 – Reason for Most Recent Service Interaction



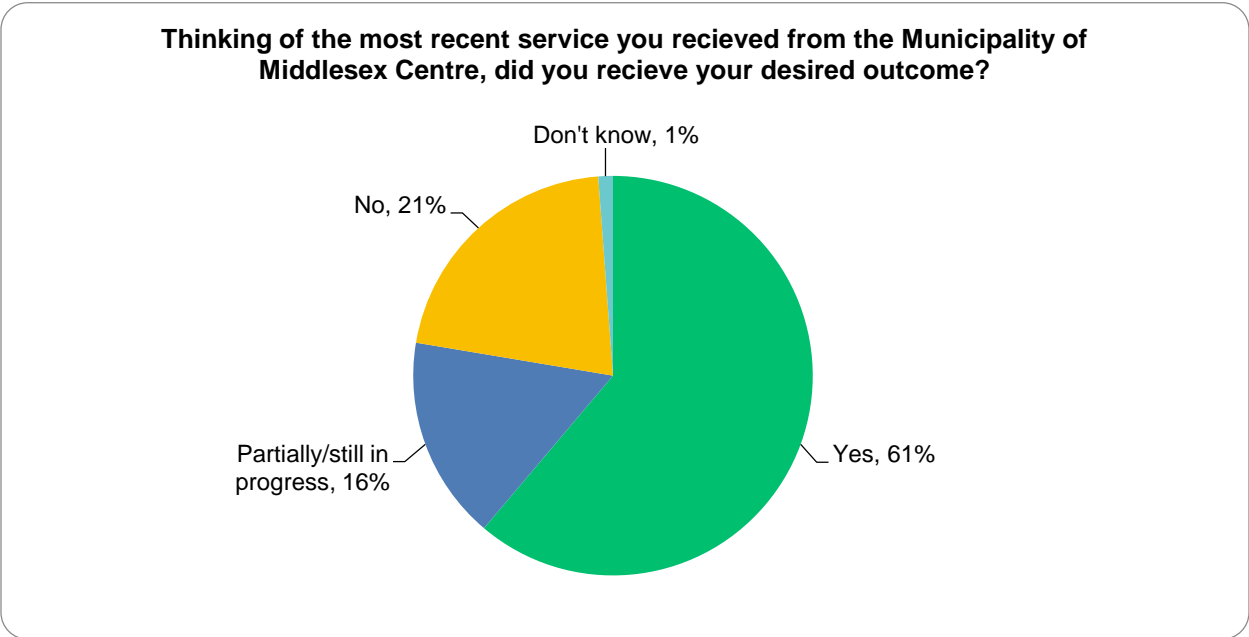
The 2022 and 2023 surveys found reporting a concern and paying bills to be the most common reasons for receiving service from Middlesex Centre.

Question 3 – Overall Satisfied

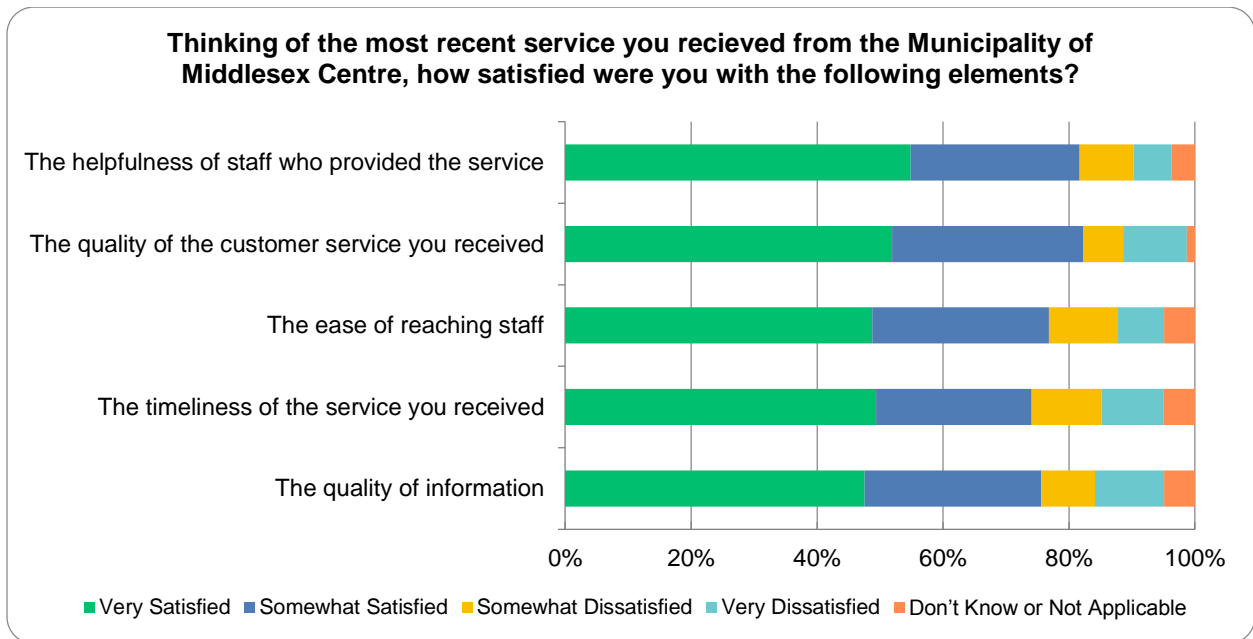


This is comparable with the 2022 and 2023 survey responses, which found “Most respondents are satisfied overall with the customer service they received, and few are unsatisfied.”

Question 4 – Desired Service Outcome Received

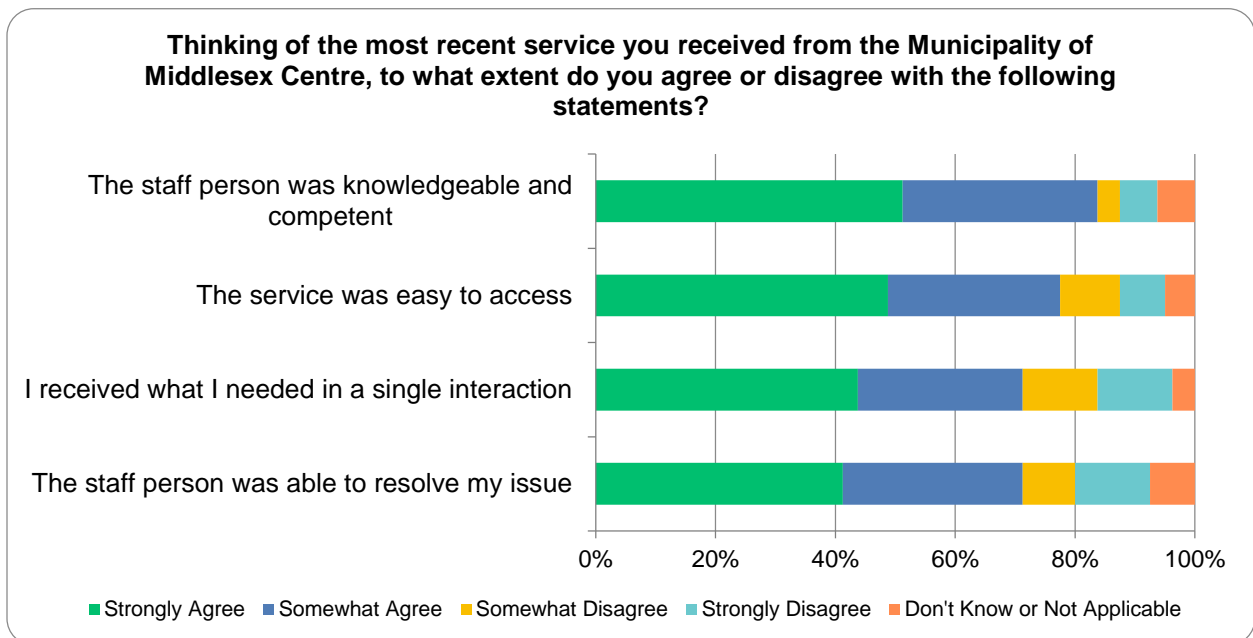


Question 5 – Satisfaction with Services



These results are comparable to the 2023 survey, with “the quality of the customer service you received” and “the helpfulness of the staff” seeing slight increases in those somewhat and very satisfied.

Question 6 – Easy of interaction



When compared with this question in the 2023 survey, all areas saw a slight increase in respondents indicating they strongly or somewhat agreed.

Written Comments

The survey asked respondents, “Do you have any suggestions for improvements or changes to customer service from the Municipality of Middlesex Centre?” Twenty-two respondents provided comments.

Of note, six of those were positive comments, such as “Staff have been great” and “You do a good job.”

The remaining customer service comments were about either a specific interaction or suggestion for service improvement. These have been shared with the appropriate departments. Other comments were outside of customer service, related to topics such as government spending or political decisions.

b) Feedback from Middlesex Centre Staff

Managers were asked if they or their staff had any challenges in meeting the timelines or expectations of the Customer Service Policy. They reported that meeting the timelines in the policy has not been an issue, with staff getting back to requests within guidelines. As a reminder, those guidelines are:

- Straightforward requests can and should be answered within 2 business days.
- Where requests are more complicated and require additional time to respond, staff are to acknowledge receipt of customer request within 2 business days, and then within 5 business days provide a response OR provide a timeline for an expected response. The latter often is necessary when the response requires gathering information from external sources.

Managers indicated a few challenges, some of which persist from last year:

- 1) callers not leaving voicemail messages when staff are either on the phone or away from their desk, making it impossible to follow-up;
- 2) managing expectations with regards to responding to a request to acknowledge receipt (customer service) vs. the timelines to undertake the request (operations);
- 3) during significant / exceptional events, such as the flooding in the summer of 2024, it can be difficult for staff to respond within the 2-day timeline. While staff did respond all inquiries related to the flooding, it took longer than 2 days in some cases; and
- 4) increasingly, language barriers where English is not the caller’s first language. This can be exacerbated by poor call quality.

Staff will be looking at ways to address these challenges, including cultural / language awareness training and the use of the website, translation and other online tools.

Three: Responding to Recommendations in Customer Service Review

The Customer Service Review put forward several specific recommendations for the municipality to consider. The following table summarizes Middlesex Centre’s responses to those recommendations.

Recommendation	Suggested Timing	Year 1 (2023) Status	Year 2 (2024) Status	Middlesex Centre Comment
<p>1a) Establish Service Standards and Begin Tracking Establish a set of service standards and measures that each department will track. Provide guidance on how and what to track.</p>	Y1 Q1 to Q4	Completed and ongoing.	Ongoing.	<p>The new policy was implemented early in 2023. Tracking metrics include the number and nature of front-desk phone calls and walk-ins, including how often customers receive an answer to their question without transferring to another staff member. Where possible, metrics on phone calls and emails to general accounts are being collected through IT logs.</p>
<p>1b) Establish Service Standards and Begin Tracking Assign accountability to collate and review service standards performance.</p>	Y1 Q1 to Q4	Completed and ongoing.	Ongoing.	<p>All staff are responsible for meeting customer service standards (such as response timelines). Managers are responsible for monitoring service times and working to address any deficiencies. Front desk staff are responsible for data collection.</p>
<p>2) Enhance CS Training Material Revise CS training program to be periodic and revise CS material and procedures binder.</p>	Y1 Q1	Completed and ongoing.	Ongoing.	<p>In 2024, finance and administrative staff with front-facing positions participated in webinars on handling offensive customers and comments and enhancing internal customer service offered by AMCTO. This adds on training 2023 for all staff related to providing customer service excellence, accessibility, respect in the workplace, telephone, email, and social media etiquette, as well as dementia friendly training for staff with a front-facing position. The front desk customer service “binder” is updated as needed and reviewed quarterly to ensure it is up-to-date.</p>

Recommendation	Suggested Timing	Year 1 (2023) Status	Year 2 (2024) Status	Middlesex Centre Comment
<p>3) Customer Service Awareness Campaign</p> <p>Develop a communications marketing campaign to deliver targeted messaging to improve residents' awareness of customer services (with a focus on e-billing and other online services).</p>	<p>Y1 Q3, Y2 Q3, Y3 Q3</p>	<p>Completed and ongoing.</p>	<p>Ongoing.</p>	<p>Staff continue to promote e-billing, preauthorized payments and other online payment options through the website, social media, tax and water bills, tax bill inserts, etc.</p> <p>The Canada Post strike at the end of 2024 provided a boost to the numbers signed up for these services. During the strike, staff ran messaging in all media channels encouraging the switch to e-billing.</p> <p>The use of these services continues to grow. As an example, for Middlesex Centre tax billing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accounts (properties) with Email Billing (year-end): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 2019 – 764 ○ 2023 – 2,022 ○ 2024 – 2,777 (37% increase year-over-year) • Accounts (properties) with Preauthorized Payments (year-end): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 2019 – 1,316 ○ 2023 – 1,786 ○ 2024 – 1,887 (5% increase year-over-year)
<p>4) Launch a Customer Service Survey</p> <p>Introduce an online biannual customer satisfaction survey. Track the results over time.</p>	<p>Y1 Q4, Y3 Q4</p>	<p>Completed and ongoing.</p>	<p>Ongoing.</p>	<p>Middlesex Centre includes customer service questions in the annual budget survey and will do a full customer service survey once per term of council.</p>
<p>5) Update County GIS Maps</p> <p>Improve accessibility of zoning information.</p>	<p>Y1 Q1</p>	<p>Completed and ongoing.</p>	<p>Ongoing.</p>	<p>Zoning information is provided for each parcel, and there is a direct link to the zoning description in the Consolidated Zoning By-law. Information is updated regularly.</p>

Recommendation	Suggested Timing	Year 1 (2023) Status	Year 2 (2024) Status	Middlesex Centre Comment
<p>6) Go-to-Market CRM / ERP Systems</p> <p>As the Municipality goes to market for replacing its accounting system expand the scope to include software suites that also have CRM functionality.</p>	Y1 Q3 to Y2 Q1	Not started.	Not started.	Timing for this item will be linked to the procurement of a new accounting system. The customer service data collected during the intervening period will be used to inform the type of system required.
<p>7) Update Website</p> <p>Revise the website to enhance its ability to provide more self-service functionality.</p>	Y1 Q2 to Q4	Ongoing.	Ongoing.	<p>Updates and improvements are made whenever possible. Online webforms are available, with other less frequently used forms available as fillable PDFs. New forms are added as required. Additional self-service options will be incorporated when new accounting software is procured in future.</p> <p>Additional online services include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cloudpermit – online building and planning service • Univerus – online recreation program registration • Paymentus – online credit card payment service
<p>8) Pilot the use of a Resident Portal</p> <p>Pilot the use of a resident portal with a segment of Municipal customers. Based on the pilot's success, rollout the portal to all customers and extend its functionality.</p>	Y1 Q3 to Y2 Q1	Not started.	Not started.	While webforms allow residents to complete many service requests online, Middlesex Centre does not have a true portal currently. It will be incorporated when new accounting software procured in future.

Recommendation	Suggested Timing	Year 1 (2023) Status	Year 2 (2024) Status	Middlesex Centre Comment
<p>9) Pilot the use of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) Use RPA to automate workflows for common customer service processes.</p>	Y2 Q2 to Q4	Not started.	Completed, with additional roll-out expected.	In 2024, Middlesex Centre used RPA to automate aspects of the property owner Weldon Park parking pass requests and for accepting applications for positions on municipal boards. These first pilots were successful, and further roll-out is expected in 2025 and going forward for additional services.
<p>10) Pilot the use of Chatbots / Live Chat Pilot the use of a chat system on the Municipality's website and promoting its use will divert call and email volume and reduce staff time.</p>	Y3 Q1 to Q4	Not started.	Not started.	With new advances in AI making chatbots more efficient, staff will be reviewing their use in 2025.

Analysis:

Middlesex Centre’s mission is “to deliver the highest standard in municipal services in sustainable professional and innovative manner.” Staff apply this lens to all their work, including the delivery of customer service.

Middlesex Centre receives tens of thousands of calls and emails each year. Staff are striving to meet the timelines and first contact request resolution standards for all incoming calls and queries, and by-in-large are meeting with success. Although the survey offered only a small sample, most respondents were satisfied with the customer service they received.

Middlesex Centre continues to improve the customer service offered. In 2023, all staff received training in various aspects of customer service, and additional training was provided to front-line staff in 2024. Staff have implemented many of the recommendations coming from the Customer Service Review and will address additional recommendations in 2025. Additionally, related to customer service, staff have considered:

- Continuing to take tax and water bill payments at the customer service desk at the Komoka Wellness Centre after the main front desk returns to Coldstream (post-office renovations). Unfortunately, this initiative will not be moving forward due to staff capacity.

- Moving to not accept cash at the Komoka Wellness Centre for recreation programs, etc. – This was suggested and explored, however after review and feedback staff have decided to keep cash as a payment option to ensure we are meeting the needs of our residents.

Financial Implications:

None. Costs associated with customer service are included in the annual budget process.

Strategic Plan:

This matter aligns with following strategic priorities:

- Responsive Municipal Government

Objective 5.1 in the strategic plan is to enhance customer service, with implementing a customer service policy and increasing digital services listed as specific strategies.