CCMA Leadership Series | Autumn 2026

# Public Services: Leading Through Complexity

CCMA Contact Centre Management Association

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## CCMA Leadership Forum Series

The Leadership Series is the documented output from the CCMA's series of Leadership Forum roundtables. These take place at the House of Lords and provide an exclusive opportunity for senior contact centre leaders to explore the key factors driving change in their industry - and to consider how to continue innovating and adding value for the benefit of the customer, colleagues, and the business.



## At the Table - chaired by Leigh Hopwood, CEO, CCMA

**Daniel Allen**
Operations Director, National Residential Landlords Association

**Jay Bolaky**
Customer Support Hub Delivery Manager, NHS Professionals

**Neil Cobley**
Head of Contact Centre Operations, DVLA

**Ian Conduit**
Director of Sales and Business Development, Foundever UK

**Anthony Costigan**
Head of Operations, Pinnacle Group

**Michelle Dawson**
Executive Director of Operations, Plymouth Community Homes

**Monique Duchen**
Head of Customer Service, EMH Housing

**Gary Elsey**
Head of Service Delivery, HM Land Registry

**Colin Goodbody**
Head of Customer Operations, Bromford Flagship

**Tanya Gray**
Head of Customer Operations, Moat Homes

**Natalia Hadfield**
Head of Customer Experience, VIVID Homes

**Jo Thomas**
Head of Drivers and Digital Operations, DVLA

**James Waite**
Head of Marketing, Foundever UK

**Sarah Williams**
Director of Customer Experience, Notting Hill Genesis

# When Complexity Becomes the Job

Contact centres in public service organisations are being asked to meet a host of evolving demands. These include improving customer outcomes, responding to changing regulation, transforming ageing systems, making better use of data and technology and protecting the experience of colleagues who are having to carry an increasing cognitive load.

Leaders from housing, healthcare and government came together at the House of Lords to explore how these pressures are reshaping their customer operations.

## Key Discussion Points

### Complexity is becoming a defining operational challenge.

Leaders describe services shaped by regulatory change, fragmented customer journeys, legacy technology and rising expectations. Organisational complexity can on occasion become visible to customers, while colleagues are often required to navigate multiple systems, policies and internal dependencies to resolve a query.

### The frontline role is increasingly about problem-solving.

As knowledge becomes easier to surface through digital tools and AI, the differentiators on the frontline are judgement, empathy, communication, resilience and an ability to manage challenging interactions. Recruitment is consequently shifting towards attitude, values and adaptability, while technology and data skills are spreading beyond specialist teams.

### Traditional contact centre metrics are under pressure.

There is strong support for moving the conversation around metrics from speed and activity towards outcomes. Some leaders question the value of measures such as handling time when the fundamental test should be whether the customer achieves what they need from an interaction.

### AI is creating capacity and insight, but not necessarily reducing demand.

Current uses include transcription, summarisation, automated quality assurance, knowledge support and customer insight. Digital transformation and automation can shift where resource is required rather than simply remove work. Leaders in public services are therefore, in the main, more focused on using technology to ensure their people are more effective, and release capacity for dealing with increasingly challenging interactions rather than treating AI as a headcount-reducing exercise.

### Data abundance is not the same as insight.

Some leaders report working with large, fragmented or legacy data environments. The priority is increasingly to connect information, understand causation and turn data into something colleagues and leaders can act on. A more complete view of the customer is seen as central to better individual decisions and more effective service design.

### Leadership resilience deserves the same attention as frontline resilience.

Managers are absorbing continual change, greater operational responsibility and pressures previously carried by support functions. Leaders highlight coaching, leadership development, wellbeing and creating time for managers to be with their teams as important investments, if transformation is to be sustainable.



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## Recruiting for a New Type of Contact Centre

For many leaders in the public services sector, there is a transformation away from the traditional model of what a contact centre is perceived to be. Advisors are supporting people through tenancy problems, regulatory disputes and moments of genuine hardship, and some leaders have suggested their colleagues now operate closer to counsellors than contact interaction handlers. In housing in particular, every case is tied to someone's home and circumstances, so the service has to be individualised rather than standardised. This requires major rethinks in terms of operational design, and evolving the skillset requirements of those being recruited.




An example - one organisation preparing to double the size of its contact centre is building its recruitment profile around attitude and a willingness to work alongside AI, including skills such as prompt engineering and building tools with generative AI products that can potentially be of use beyond the contact centre and in the wider organisation. Others are recruiting for values ahead of specific experience and asking specialist teams to take on more cross-functional work.

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The skills market brings its own complications, with new sector qualifications in specific sectors such as housing potentially narrowing the pool of talent available, as well as people with digital skills tending to gravitate towards major employment hubs and leaders now managing as many as six generations at once, including younger colleagues whose early working lives were shaped by the pandemic.

Leaders described a tension in preparing people for new roles, training colleagues to use AI confidently while asking them to be more human in every interaction. One approach to tackle this is a colleague engagement group, run by frontline staff, that is shaping how AI will be used within a new omnichannel platform. The concept is simple – that the people closest to the work are best placed to say where technology might best free up their time. Their involvement also makes them decision-makers in any given change, as opposed to feeling like decisions are being made without their insight and their proximity to the customer being leant on for guidance.

## A Better-Informed, More Demanding Customer

Generative AI is a clear point of discussion for public services leaders and it is not only changing what happens inside operations, it is changing the customer's approach to interactions. Leaders describe receiving complaints drafted with AI, for instance, and advisors being told they are incorrect because a customer has checked an answer to a questions with an AI tool. One organisation handling around 1,300 complaints a month reports that many now show signs of AI involvement. Because AI makes a detailed challenge so easy to write, the barrier to complaining has fallen sharply and some cases now run back and forth for days and even weeks. In sectors facing intense regulatory change, that puts even more pressure on keeping colleague knowledge accurate and current, and the ability to resolve complaints within allotted times.

It's important to note that AI's use by customers is not merely seen as a threat, however. Some leaders argue that many customers turn to AI because they lack trust in some institutions, and that it is giving a voice to those who have historically gone unheard. The task, in that view, is to help customers use that voice more effectively, and to build services equipped to respond to it. Trust surfaces in other ways too – some customers favour contacting public services organisations via email because it leaves an evidence trail, which could be seen as a prompt to make voice channels feel equally dependable. For many organisations in this sector, the telephone remains the most-used channel despite a substantial digital programme, and therefore how to increase the trust customers feel when they contact is a huge part of their remit.

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AI is also helping organisations find the customers who don't get in touch at all. One housing provider leader states they use AI to identify 'silent' customers in potentially vulnerable situations who were not contacting the organisation. Of those identified, 80% turned out to need some form of tenancy intervention. It is a finding that landed immediately at board level, and it shows how technology can move a service from reacting to customer needs to becoming more proactive and anticipating them.




## Nuance in Metrics Shifts

Leaders describe a recurring tension between wanting each interaction to be the right experience for individual customers and still being measured on speed and volume. One organisation has stopped measuring average handling time at team level altogether, making outcome-based intent the central shift in how it manages performance.

Rather than working up from the existing dashboard, some leaders suggest working down from purpose – i.e. begin with why the organisation exists at all, then ask what should be measured to show it is achieving that requirement. Clarity of outcome then shapes everything beneath it, and if the aim is to fix things first time, for example, benchmarking and measurement need to be designed around that aim. Secondary measures still have an important role, particularly cost-to-serve, which varies considerably by channel, and the right balance will differ from one sector to the next.

Moving away from traditional measures is not an easy shift for many leaders, however. Some have partly-outsourced operations where the shift is harder to define, and there are also regulations around what good service looks like. Several leaders see an opportunity to work more closely with regulators on defining 'experience' and separating perception from reality, so that services are not left chasing targets that pull against the outcomes customers need.


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## Transformation Can Take Time

Many leaders state they are some way through a transformation programme of some form. One government organisation is a decade into its transformation and expects a further ten years of work, connecting customer journeys across a large number of systems and legacy databases. In contrast, another is looking to complete a transformation programme within a period of months. Leaders speak about how hard it can be to secure sign-off for change programmes, and how difficult it is to know which technology to invest in, and when, in a market where some organisations are now experiencing fatigue, specifically in relation to the AI-driven tools available to them.

There is no lack of enthusiasm among public services leaders about the positive steps they can take to improve their operations and make them more future-ready.

Sustained change is landing heavily on managers as well as their teams, however, and leaders report absorbing work that once sat elsewhere, and overseeing strategy that becomes harder to deliver when day-to-day pressures crowd it out. Some organisations are having to place a high proportion of colleagues in temporary management roles without the development investment that would help them grow into leadership, because of ongoing change programmes. Conversely, others are finding ways to give time back, with one leader describing the automation of their Quality Assurance (QA) allowing them to repurpose their QA function to maintain their knowledge base instead, freeing leaders to spend more time with their teams, while QA itself is shifting from box-ticking towards insight.

Asked where they would focus any future investment, leaders are still fairly unanimous, however, leaning heavily towards the development of their people. Coaching cultures, bespoke AI training, health and wellbeing, reskilling, leadership development and greater recognition of customer service qualifications all feature, alongside systemic social work training for all staff and customer advocates within frontline teams. Data is the other common priority, from a single holistic view of the customer to centralised complaints handling and proper root-cause analysis. There is no lack of enthusiasm among public services leaders about the positive steps they can take to improve their operations and make them more future-ready.

## Key Takeaways

- **Starting with purpose can help define new metrics.** Defining the outcome each service exists to deliver, keeping efficiency measures as a supporting layer rather than the driver, and bringing stakeholders and regulators into that conversation early are all suggested approaches.
- **Designing AI adoption with the frontline can empower them.** Colleague-led groups can pinpoint where technology will genuinely release capacity and build ownership of the change in the process.
- **Preparing for the AI-equipped customer is a must.** Knowledge, complaints processes and advisor confidence all need to keep pace with customers who arrive with AI-generated interactions, while voice channels remain a trusted option for those who need them.
- **Using data to reach 'silent' customers can be hugely beneficial.** Proactively identifying vulnerability can shift a service from reacting to needs towards preventing them.
- **Resource and capacity is shifting rather than disappearing.** Business cases for digital and AI are expecting to see demand move into more complex work for teams rather than fall away.
- **Investing in managers and leaders is becoming more vital.** Protected coaching time, proper development for new and temporary leaders and attention to wellbeing are what make long-term transformation sustainable.



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0333 939 9964

www.ccma.org.uk

info@ccma.org.uk

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