



<u>Committee and Date</u>
Cabinet
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Opening hours across Customer Service Points

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1. Summary

- 1.1 Shropshire Council provides a face to face customer service function in our market and rural towns via a network of Customer Service Points. There are 9 smaller rural Customer Service Points which are located at Albrighton, Bishop's Castle, Broseley, Church Stretton, Cleobury Country, Craven Arms, Ellesmere, Shifnal and Wem which have been, or are in the process of being, transferred to new management arrangements. Customer numbers at these smaller sites is traditionally very low. There are also 6 larger sites located in Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Market Drayton, Whitchurch, Bridgnorth and Ludlow and these see the large majority of our customer business.
- 1.2 Shropshire's citizens access council services through these venues for many different reasons, from simple transactions to much more complex life issues however the common trend across all sites has been a steady reduction in customer numbers with overall footfall having reduced by around 60% in the last 5 years. Despite this decrease in customer numbers, the opening hours of the service and the staff hours that are input in our larger sites has remained unchanged.
- 1.3 Given the high cost of face to face transactions, quoted by the Society of IT Managers as £8.62 compared to 15p for an online transaction, Customer Services have for some time encouraged and assisted customers who are able to do so to use self-service facilities which are public freephones linked to our Customer Service Centre and online services using newly installed public computers. Staff are then able to concentrate on helping customers who have more complex or technical issues that clearly require personal interaction with the customer. Our intention to automate bus pass renewals later this year is an example of how large operational savings can be made whilst maintaining, or in this case improving, the service our customers receive.

- 1.4 This natural reduction in customer numbers and an increasing ability to use alternative channels to do business with the Council, is occurring in parallel to the Council seeking community partners and new funding streams that can help to maintain these local services as the venues through which they operate come under increasing financial pressure. In the worst case scenario this pressure could mean the closure of such venues.
- 1.5 There is therefore an opportunity to review the level of both opening times and staff resources for each of our larger sites which may in turn make local investment in their running costs more attractive and at a level that is more appropriate to actual customer demand. This will only be done in consultation with our customers and with the clear objective of continuing a face to face service for those customers who need it.

2: Recommendations:

Members are requested to:

- A Grant approval for a review of both the opening times and staffed hours input to larger Customer Service Points on a site by site basis with appropriate public and stakeholder consultation. The outcomes of consultation are to be brought back before Cabinet for further consideration.
- B Cabinet is recommended to give delegated authority to the Director of Public Health, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Support, with input from the Director of Commissioning to make any further decisions on service delivery.

3: Background: Customer Services Face to Face provision

- 3.1 Customer Services operates public access points across Shropshire. Of the 9 smaller rural sites with very low customer numbers, all but 2 make use of library buildings the management of which is being transferred to other providers, namely Town Councils and community sector providers. New operators are following a self-serve and assisted self-serve model for customer services functions using public freephones and computers through which customers can do business with us. Customer Services continue to provide technical support for our new providers which enables them in turn to provide the service without direct input from Shropshire Council staff.
- 3.2 There are also six larger customer service points, or community hubs, where we see the vast majority of our customers. Of these larger hubs, Oswestry, Bridgnorth and Ludlow are currently co-located with the town libraries. Self-service facilities are not yet in place at all of these venues however where they are installed,

customers are able to manage a range of appropriate business with us over the phone and online with many now calling in specifically to use these. The use of a “meeter and greeter” who is quickly able to identify those customers who could self-serve and offer them assistance to do so where necessary, has led to a reduction in the number of customers needing direct help from more specialist staff.

- 3.3 Customer numbers at our face to face points have been steadily declining over a number of years with annual footfall reducing by just under 60% as shown in the table below:

Year ended	April 2012	April 2013	April 2014	April 2015	April 2016
Customer numbers	125826	123574	92781	67321	52346

Customer Services have initiated the automation later this year of the majority of concessionary travel renewals. In any normal year this would mean a further 5% reduction in customer footfall – between 400 and 600 customers per month, however during the bulk renewal period which occurs over the next two years this will mean that up to 1700 customers per month will receive a better service without the need to call at one of our offices.

- 3.4 Encouraging those who are able to access services independently to do so in turn enables Customer Service staff to help those customers who are unable to help themselves or who have more involved and complex issues often spanning more than one service. Complex issues with finances or benefits (including housing benefits and local crisis funding applications) and housing (including homelessness) on average account for around 40% of the business we deal with each month with some offices seeing a much higher percentage than this. The face to face service will also provide some of the triage, signposting and commissioning of specialist support for more vulnerable customers as the Universal Credit rolls out. The latest information received from the Department for Work & Pensions is to the effect that Shropshire can expect many individuals and families, both working and out of work, to transfer onto Universal Credit from early 2017.

4 Future operating requirements

- 4.1 The recent Cabinet paper “A Partnership approach in designing the Future of our Local Services” sought approval on the principles and approaches Shropshire Council will use to engage and work with partners to try secure a sustainable future for local services and community based assets as well as which services and assets will be included within this approach, and how this work will be resourced and delivered.

- 4.2 Alongside this work and in view of falling customer numbers, there now exists an opportunity to re-examine the resource input required at our face to face sites so that the service can be maintained at more affordable and appropriate levels. The learning from our current hub operating model, the changing nature of our business particularly in helping customers with more complex issues and the opportunities that new IT functionality may bring will be incorporated into any new operating model so that the service is future-fit for our customers.
- 4.3 In the same way that each of our market towns is unique, so too are the numbers of customers seeking to use their face to face service and the reasons for which they call. The recommended approach across the six major hub sites is to consult upon and consider each venue individually and in partnership with any potential new operating partner. Additionally, consideration of TUPE implications or obligations for current staff will be required in the event of other providers taking on the running of services.

5 Risk assessment and opportunities appraisal:

- 5.1 Earlier models of co-locating self-service and assisted self-service facilities with Town Councils have been helpful to the Town Councils themselves as their responsibilities have synergy with our own and to customers who do not differentiate between those responsibilities when seeking access to local services.
- 5.2 Place-based reviews of the service would need to be co-ordinated with wider discussions on transfer and delivery of other local services as recommended in “A partnership approach to designing the future of our local services”. Timescales on these discussions are tight with risks identified around adequately resourcing the project and the capacity for public and stakeholder challenge potentially delaying progress.
- 5.3 There is a risk that any reduction of the number of hours during which trained staff are available will fail to meet equality and social inclusion obligations. The impact at each site will be assessed through the completion of an Equality and Social Inclusion Impact Assessment which will take into account the types of customer business at each site, numbers of callers and levels of digital inclusion and exclusion that could impact on any decision, the alternative provision afforded by self-service facilities and the range of services available through these and the level of help on hand to successfully access these alternatives.
- 5.4 Shropshire citizens could construe proposals to reduce opening hours as an erosion of the service as opposed to matching times and staff resources to a much reduced level of actual customer activity. We will consult with our customers on a site by site basis to inform them appropriately and to gauge their opinions and seek their ideas. Consultation material would seek to reassure customers who

could not manage independently that help is still there for them and of the amount of adviser time that would still be available per customer in the event of reduced opening. We will make sure that customers are informed of proposals to support them to do business with us when specialist staff were not on site. For example, using our experience from sites where customers already self-serve, we would ensure that public freephones were available and linked to the right services for the site, with clearly signposted instructions making them easy to use. Opportunities to work with any new delivery partners who could provide the assistance needed to carry out more transactional business using online services will be pursued.

6 Financial implications

- 6.1 Shropshire Council published its updated Financial Strategy on 17th February 2016. By 2020/21 the government's £44m revenue support grant is forecast to end. Before the final settlement for 2016/17 it had been anticipated that a further £77m savings would be required over the next 5 years due to the combination of inflationary increases in costs, demographic pressure, particularly in adult social care, and cuts in government grants. However, further pressures identified within the February 2016 Financial Strategy has highlighted a worse position than previously forecast, with £61m savings now required by 2018/19.
- 6.2 Figures given out as part of Shropshire Council's Big Conversation predicted that by 2020/21 some 87% of the council's resources will be needed to pay for protected services such as adult's and children's social care and safeguarding, domestic waste disposal, concessionary travel and school transport, leaving just 13% of resources to be spent on the remaining 150 plus services currently provided by the council.
- 6.3 The future delivery of the Customer Services function is part of a wider organisational restructure that will enable substantial savings to be made. A review of face to face customer services carried out in conjunction with the partnership approach to designing local services, based on the level of staff input and the opening hours needed will contribute to savings of £227,000 and an income target of £164,000 in the current financial year as well as the contribute to the future sustainability of local services.
- 6.4 Working with other partners, particularly health partners, widens the spectrum of services available to our customers at the first point of contact. Combining this with collaborative working with other council services increases the capacity to identify and alleviate crisis for vulnerable customers thus saving costs for the council elsewhere.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Agenda item 99, Cabinet February 2015: Hubs Commissioning Model

Agenda item 7, Cabinet May 2015: Future Delivery of Customer Services In Shropshire pages 19 to 26.

Agenda item 63, Cabinet October 2015: Redesigning Shropshire Council's Library Service and Customer Service Points

Agenda item 7, Cabinet April 2016: A Partnership approach in designing the future of our Local Services

Cabinet Member : Michael Wood

Local Member

Appendix 1 – Equalities and Social Inclusion Impact Assessment