



Committee and Date
Cabinet
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Opening Hours across Customer Service Points

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1. Summary

This report follows an earlier Cabinet report of 13 July 2016, requesting permission to consult with the public over proposed changes to the Customer Service Point opening times at our 6 main offices located at Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Market Drayton, Whitchurch, Bridgnorth and Ludlow. Over the last 5 years we have seen a reduction in face to face customer numbers of between 50 and 70% as people increasingly use different ways of doing business with the Council. The customers we now see at these customer service points are those who require more help or for whom there is little alternative to a face to face service due to the nature of their business.

This report contains recommendations for reducing the number of hours for which the service will be available in order to more closely reflect the new level of demand.

These recommendations are made following a public consultation during which 276 people responded. Consultation channels included online feedback and social media channels but concentrated mainly on active engagement with the customers who called in to see us during the period. A proposed option for revised hours at each individual site was provided as part of the public consultation. In arriving at the final recommendations within this report, account was taken of the number of customers using the office, the busiest periods of each day and the busiest days including market days and finally the average time an adviser would be able to spend with each customer should the recommended hours be implemented. Staff safety remained a consideration, particularly avoiding lone or isolated working, as did the needs of partner agencies with whom we work in these offices and the fact that Customer Services are frequently an access point for people in crisis.

Recommendations for some sites have been amended as a result of comments raised during this consultation and the Equalities and Social Inclusion Impact Assessment, attached to this report as appendix 1, has been amended to reflect this. In making these final recommendations, regard has again been taken of the factors in the preceding paragraph. Additionally, the likelihood of new IT based self-serve solutions which may negate some of the concerns voiced by our customers remains a consideration.

A new IT based solution would offer all of the existing services of face-to-face via a web based platform, enabling service users to speak with an expert from different areas via a choice of channels including video conference. The solution would also

have a printer, scanner and phone, giving users several different options for receiving and submitting information. By investing in new and innovative ways for our customers to do business with us we will be able to further increase the cost-effectiveness of our face to face delivery whilst still catering for a broad age and ability range of customers.

2. Recommendations

Cabinet are requested to

- recommend the revised opening hours detailed in this report
- delegate the implementation of these proposals to the Head of Human Resources and Development, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Support

REPORT

3. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

The following risks have been identified with the proposed changes to opening hours.

Risk	Mitigation plans in place
This is seen as a reduction in local services	Whilst the proposal is to reduce hours this is occurring against a backdrop of a dramatic reduction in the numbers of customers actually using the service. We have seen reductions in customer numbers between 50 and 70% whilst our opening hours have remained unchanged.
Failure to provide a service for those in work.	Adjustments have been made to the recommended opening times where this may be an issue until a suitable IT based solution is available.
Inability to meet the changing needs of our customers who are moving away from simple transactions towards more complex or multiple needs.	Proposed opening times have taken account of the numbers of customers now using the service and the reasons for them doing so. Whilst some needs may take only a short time to fulfil, others will be more complex and this has been factored into proposed timings.
Negative effect on our working partners including Housing Options, Housing Support Workers, Credit Unions, People 2 People and charitable providers.	The attending days and times for partners have been factored in and accommodated wherever possible to avoid disruption or lone or isolated working for them.
Time required by customers with more complex needs may not be available.	Proposed opening times would allow on average at least 25 minutes with a customer.

4.0 Financial implications

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 financial year 2016/2017 and will facilitate further efficiency in 2017/2018 and put the sustainability of local services at a level more appropriate to the need in the community.

5.0 Background

The Customer Strategy 2012/2013 laid down the principle of “Channel Shift” for customer contact. Whilst recognising that there is a natural shift occurring in the way in which people conduct their everyday business, channel shift is the active management of customers and ongoing encouragement to use more cost effective alternative channels to access the services they need. Channel shift occurs naturally as customers become increasingly comfortable with online services and social media, etc.

Face to face transactions are the most expensive form of doing business with customers therefore several of our offices saw the early introduction of free to use public computers through which online transactions could be conducted and “warm phones” which were linked to our Customer Service Centre, itself capable of handling most customer enquiries. The addition of a “meeter and greeter” who, as in many of the high street bank operations, encouraged, supported and educated customers to use self-service channels proved successful in diverting many transactional contacts away from desk advisers. This self-service model has subsequently been introduced at all 6 main offices.

As a result and parallel to natural shift, customer numbers at our face to face points have been steadily declining over the last 5 years with overall 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

The footfall reductions for individual offices is detailed in appendix 2 of this report.

Statistically, the reasons for customers calling in to use our face to face service has proportionately altered during this time with transactional business declining but issues around benefits, homelessness, financial issues and latterly welfare reform issues holding steady or increasing and now accounting for between 30 and 50% of our face to face work.

Anecdotally, we recognise that customers use our face to face service for a particular reason. This may be a generational issue or down to the person's ability to use alternative channels in their current form where and indeed if these are available. It may be because the customer has particular issues that other methods of contact have failed to resolve, effectively handing the issue over to the face to face adviser for resolution. It may be increasingly because they are in difficulty and seeking the services available from the Council as a matter of urgency.

Channel shift of appropriate business is instrumental in allowing advisers to be able to devote time to customers with multiple or complex needs.

6.0 Outcomes of the public consultation on Customer Service Point opening hours

We consulted with our customers between 12 September 2016 and 7 October 2016 during which a total of 276 replies were received. This represents 8.1% of the customers seen at these sites over the period of consultation. A further 35 people accessed the online survey but left no opinion.

Customers were provided with information explaining why changes to opening times were felt necessary and a set of frequently asked questions covering the main issues we expected this would raise. Paper consultation forms were provided at each affected Customer Service Point and opinion was also sought via the online portal with appropriate publicity including via social media. Town Councils were invited to participate as were welfare reform partner organisations such as Housing Associations and voluntary sector organisations.

Staff were instructed to actively engage with all customers using the service during the consultation period. The information provided by the customer survey and FAQ's was used to inform the proposals.

During the period of consultation just under 3400 customers used the affected customer service points. Whilst most customers chose not to participate in the exercise, the replies from those that did held strong opinion.

Three common themes arose from the comments passed by customers:

- Inability to access the service for those in work who are required to provide information to the Council.
- A fear of erosion or loss of a local service
- A need for uniform hours where possible to avoid confusion
- An appreciation of the wide specialist knowledge and ability of customer service staff.

Appendix 2 of this report gives greater detail on a site-by-site basis of customer numbers, busy days and times, consultation replies and how these factors have influenced the recommendations for revised service opening times.

The Equality and Social Inclusion Impact Assessment has been updated in acknowledgement of the replies received and the suggestions and concerns raised by customers.

The revised recommendations which are detailed below, alongside those originally proposed, attempt to meet the concerns raised as far as practicable.

Customer Service Point	Proposal put to public consultation	Opening hours final recommendations
Bridgnorth	Monday 10.00 – 4.00 Tuesday 10.00 – 4.00 Wednesday 10.00 – 4.00 Thursday 9.30 – 4.30 Friday 10.00 – 3.30 Proposed reduction from 40 hours currently to 30 hours	Monday 9.30 – 5.00 Tuesday 10.00 – 4.00 Wednesday 10.00 – 4.00 Thursday 10.00 – 4.00 Friday 9.30 – 5.00 Recommended reduction from 40 hours currently to 33 hours
Ludlow	Monday 10.00 – 4.00 Tuesday 10.00 – 4.00 Wednesday 10.00 – 4.00 Thursday 9.30 – 4.00 Friday 10.00 – 3.30 Proposed reduction from 40 hours currently to 30 hours	Monday 9.30 – 5.00 Tuesday 9.30 – 5.00 Wednesday 9.30 – 5.00 Thursday CLOSED Friday 9.30 – 5.00 Recommended reduction from 40 hours currently to 30 hours
Oswestry	Monday 9.30- 4.30 Tuesday 9.30 – 4.30 Wednesday 9.30 – 4.30 Thursday 9.30 – 4.30 Friday 9.30 – 4.30 Proposed reduction from 40 hours currently to 35 hours	Monday 9.30 – 4.30 Tuesday 9.30 – 4.30 Wednesday 9.30 – 4.30 Thursday 9.30 – 4.30 Friday 9.30 – 4.30 Recommended as per proposal. Reduction from 40 to 35 hours per week.
Market Drayton	Monday 10.30 – 3.30 Tuesday 10.00 – 4.00 Wednesday 10.00 – 3.30 Thursday 10.30 – 3.30 Friday 10.30 – 3.00 Proposed reduction from 32.5 hours currently to 26 hours	Monday 10.00 – 3.00 Tuesday 10.00 – 3.00 Wednesday 10.00 – 4.00 Thursday 10.00 – 4.00 Friday 10.00 – 4.00 Recommended reduction from 32.5 hours currently to 28 hours
Shrewsbury	Monday 9.00 - 5.00	Monday 9.00 - 5.00

	<p>Tuesday 9.00 – 4.00 Wednesday 9.00 – 4.00 Thursday 9.00 – 4.00 Friday 9.00 – 5.00</p> <p>Proposed reduction from 42.5 hours currently to 37 hours</p>	<p>Tuesday 9.00 – 4.00 Wednesday 9.00 – 4.00 Thursday 9.00 – 4.00 Friday 9.00 – 5.00</p> <p>Recommended as per proposal. Reduction from 42.5 hours to 37 hours.</p>
Whitchurch	<p>Monday 10.00-4.00 Tuesday 10.00-4.00 Wednesday 10.00-4.00 Thursday 10.00-4.00 Friday 10.00-4.00 Saturday 10.00-1.00*</p> <p>*Service provided by Town Council staff</p>	<p>Monday 10.00-4.00* Tuesday 10.00-4.00* Wednesday 10.00-4.00* Thursday 10.00-4.00 Friday 10.00-4.00 Saturday 10.00-1.00*</p> <p>*Service provided by Town Council staff</p>

The overall reduction in the opening hours across all affected offices amounts to 47 per week under the revised proposals as opposed to the 52 initially suggested during consultation. Importantly, this will continue to meet the revised customer need that we are now experiencing as new and alternative ways for them to do business with the Council develop along more cost effective channels. In addition, self-service facilities in the shape of customer freephones and public computers remain available for use at the majority of sites outside the hours for which a staffed service is available. In this way, the concerns voiced by customers around later closing to accommodate working customers, more uniform hours where possible and retaining the knowledge and skills of staff as a local resource should be satisfactorily answered.

8.0 Next steps

Should these recommendations be accepted by Cabinet we will agree a lead-in period with our partner services and providers to minimise any impact on them and ensure that a campaign of customer awareness through a variety of channels is followed in order to prepare our customers for changes in opening hours.

The impact of these proposals on staff will be different at each customer service point and an appropriate period of staff consultation will take place prior to implementing any changes.

We will continue to develop new ways in which our customers can do business with Shropshire Council that increase cost effectiveness of our delivery at a time of reducing resources as well as being simple, convenient and appropriate to the customers whom we serve. This will enable us to further develop our face to face delivery.

A project has been instigated to develop the IT solution to providing efficient information to residents in a variety of formats. The group will work in parallel

to the Digital transformation project and ensure every potential need of the project is built into the solution.

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

Agenda item 10, Cabinet 13th July 2016, Opening Hours Across Customer Service Points

Agenda item 10, Cabinet 27th July 2016, Review of Shropshire Library opening hours

Cabinet Member:

Cllr Michael Wood, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Support

Local Members:

Changes to customer service points for our 6 main offices has the potential for a County wide impact affecting all local members

Appendices:

Appendix 1 - Equality and Social Inclusion Impact Assessment

Appendix 2 – analysis of customer feedback, site by site usage and recommendations for revised opening hours