



Cabinet –

27th February 2019

Item

TBC

Public

Review of Customer Services Face to Face Points

Responsible Officer Michele Leith, Director of Workforce and Transformation
e-mail: Michele.leith@shropshire.gov.uk **Tel:** (01743) 254402

1.0 Summary

- 1.1 In November 2016, Cabinet approved reduced opening hours at our Customer Service Points in Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Whitchurch, Market Drayton, Ludlow and Bridgnorth in view of a 59% fall in customer numbers between April 2012 and April 2016. Reduction continues with a further fall of 25% compared to the preceding year between April 2016 and April 2017 and a fall of 15% compared to the preceding year between April 2017 and April 2018. Against this, our offices remain open in the main for 5 days a week.
- 1.2 There are also 9 smaller Customer Service Points at Bishop's Castle, Broseley, Shifnal, Albrighton, Church Stretton Town Council and the Mayfair Centre, Wem, Cleobury Mortimer and Ellesmere where customer support is contracted out with total costs of £31,500. Monthly use of these sites is very low, at times in single figures and some sites see no recorded use at all in some months.
- 1.3 A face to face service is the most expensive way to engage with customers and since 2012, customer service strategy has been to encourage the use of more cost effective channels, via telephone and more increasingly recently, online. Every year, our Customer Service Centre (CSC) helps around 250,000 residents of all ages to access the same services as those handled at face to face points and figures show that use of our new transactional web pages has more than doubled from 764,000 online sessions in 2015 to 1.6 million in 2017.
- 1.4 Pressures on Customer Services operating budgets require a critical examination of how best to continue to provide an effective service across our dispersed rural county whilst remaining within available budget. Therefore, in view of the continuing reduction in the numbers of customers using face to face offices and the availability of alternative ways of conducting the same business, we have reviewed the continuing need for this service at its current level and consulted with the public over proposals to revise service levels. Having done so, this paper recommends further staged reduction in the number of hours we directly staff our six main face to face sites and the decommissioning of support services from small rural sites that are no longer financially viable.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Cabinet are requested to

- agree the proposed changes to our face to face customer Services
- delegate the implementation of these changes to the Director of Workforce and Transformation, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Commercial Support

REPORT

3.0 Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

The following risks have been identified with the proposed changes.

Risk	Mitigation plans in place
This is seen as a loss of local services	Free-to-use telephones and computers linked to CSC and main council services will still be available at the 6 main offices to support staffed service days. Delivery partners at our smaller rural offices have been offered retention of self-serve equipment so that customers can still contact the CSC or take advantage of improving online services provided through Digital Transformation.
Increased customer contact at CSC could impact on call wait times	CSC staffing is at an appropriate level to cope with the expected increase in contacts. This will be sufficient to handle the numbers using our face to face sites but with the economies of scale of a central location.
Perceived inability to meet the needs of our customers with more complex or multiple needs who may present at face to face.	The Customer Service Centre already handles First Point of Contact calls for adults and children's safeguarding and works closely with Adult Services Duty Officers, therefore already handling complex enquiries which also include those at risk of homelessness and those requiring support through welfare reforms.
Withdrawal of Customer Service staff causes a negative effect on our working partners.	The proposed development of multi-service hubs will co-locate and mutually support services who retain a face to face service. In addition, there will still be a Customer Service presence through online services and direct telephone link.
Failure to provide a service for Housing Benefit customers or those in work.	Face to face staff are only able to provide a limited service for Housing Benefit issues and are mostly required to transit supporting paperwork. Housing Benefit and Council Tax have their own contact centre, are also contactable by E mail and have an online facility for claims and changes of circumstances. Supporting paperwork is preferred via digital upload or via post.

4.0 Financial implications

4.1 Customer Services is required to contribute to the savings attributable to the redesign of the Council's single front door approved in the Financial Strategy 2018/19 to 2022/23. Final amounts achievable are currently being worked through but the proposed reduction in the face to face service, together with the decommissioning of rural support contracts and a further restructuring and reduction of Customer Services middle management are expected to achieve a considerable saving whilst still maintaining in the interim a functional and reasonable local service capable of meeting customer's needs.

5.0 Background

5.1 The Customer Strategy 2012/2013 introduced "Channel Shift" of customer contact as the active management of customers towards more cost effective alternative channels to access the services they need.

5.2 Face to face transactions are the most expensive form of doing business with customers and have therefore been actively targeted to achieve this channel shift. Longstanding installation of free to use public computers and "warm phones" directly linked to popular council services have encouraged customers towards these alternatives and have contributed to the reduction in footfall.

5.3 Following a dramatic footfall reduction after the bulk face to face renewal of Concessionary Travel passes in 2012 and 2013 when many thousands of customers attended our offices, customer numbers have continued to decline steadily with overall annual footfall in the last 5 years reducing by just over 50% as shown below. It is significant that 2017 and 2018 were also bulk renewal years for Concessionary Travel passes however customer numbers continued to fall despite this. An automated renewal process that requires no action from the majority of our customers to renew passes has contributed to this reduction and we hold this up as an example of transformation of services to their simplest form, benefitting both the customer and the council.

Year ended	April 2014	April 2015	April 2016	April 2017	April 2018
Customer numbers	70615	70825	52025	39229	33079

Appendix 1 to this report details individual statistics at each of our main offices including daily customer numbers and a profile of footfall throughout the day as well as recorded usage of the 9 small rural offices.

Customers use our face to face sites to request specific services and these have been detailed below in their order of priority also showing the alternatives that our customers could use to receive an equivalent service.

Service request	Numbers using face to face year ended April 2018	Alternative service available
Housing Benefits	11389	Revenues and Benefits have their own telephone service independent of customer services. There is an online claim application and change reporting service, paper claim forms remain available. Scans of supporting documents can be uploaded digitally or posted to the Revenues and Benefits Service.
Concessionary Travel	4528	Most renewals are automated and those that are not can usually be handled through the CSC. There is also an online application available. Support is required for small numbers of first time and disabled concession applications
Revenues	3557	Customers wishing to make payment have a range of alternative face to face methods including via Post Office and PayPoint outlets as well as via direct debit or online payment. Revenues and Benefits run their own telephone service independent of customer services.
Parking	3027	Postal permit applications and payments are accepted
Blue Badge	2116	An online application is available as are paper forms. Forms and supporting evidence are requested by post. The Customer Service Centre can check progress and answer enquiries regarding applications.
Environmental Maintenance	1548	Online and telephone reporting is available
Waste	1262	Online and telephone reporting is available and CSC staff have direct access to Veolia systems for immediate solution.
ST&R Housing	856	Online and telephone reporting available directly from ST&R Housing. ST&R encourage their tenants to set up alternative payment methods to face to face.
Housing	710	CSC handle calls from those potentially

Options		homeless backed up by Housing Options specialists who provide direct telephone advice and specialist appointments. Online registration is available.
Registrars	555	Online and telephone service available for bookings, payments or replacement certificates.
Planning	246	Online application and viewing service available. Planning specialists provide telephone advice.
Licencing	236	Postal applications supported by online payment available.

5.4 We recognise that customers may prefer to use a face to face service but we face a pressing need to operate within reducing budgets and to effect, through ongoing, considered and reasonably staged reductions and further customer education, a transfer of all contacts to more cost-effective channels that can take full advantage of developments brought about through digital transformation and which can join up council and other services in a way not previously seen.

5.5 On the expectation that telephone contacts with the CSC will increase, appropriate resourcing there will ensure that customers using our face to face sites can still speak to an adviser able to identify a wide range of needs, resolving them wherever possible, but simply through a different medium. Attaching a priority to these contacts from face to face sites and a more strategic use of the customer service workforce as demand dictates will help to ensure that our face to face customers are not excluded.

6.0 Results of public consultation

6.1 We consulted with residents between 30 July 2018 and 24 August 2018 during which a total of 280 replies were received. This represents 12% of the 2332 customers that used our offices over the period of consultation and is a slightly higher number of replies than in previous consultations.

6.2 Customers were supplied with information to explain the reduction in customer numbers, the pressures on the service and the council's preferred option for changes to opening days and times, accompanied by a set of frequently asked questions with answers. Staff at each customer service point were asked to actively engage with all customers using the service in the consultation period, explain the proposals using this information and to encourage completion of survey forms. Opinion was also sought via the online portal with appropriate publicity including via social media. Town Councils were notified and invited to comment as were our welfare reform partner organisations (Housing Associations and voluntary sector organisations) and internal council teams.

- 6.3 Customers who use the service feel strongly about its value to them. Common themes from comments made are:
- This is their preferred way of dealing with council issues, it is convenient, less formal and is more personal, a daily service is vital
 - This is the only way to engage with council services face to face, staff are very helpful and knowledgeable and take ownership of the need, they help with the complicated
 - No internet access at home or not able to use a computer and unable to travel elsewhere for service
 - Limited access or difficult to access some council services
- 6.4 Opposition to the proposals was voiced by Broseley Town Council, Church Stretton Town Council and Oswestry Town Council, Councillor Andy Boddington, Nicola McPherson, Chief Officer Mayfair Centre, and comments were also received from Councillor David Vasmer.
- 6.5 We acknowledge the concerns raised. These have been considered when looking at the number of more vulnerable customers currently needing to do business with us and the times and days therefore that staff are available in our main offices to give direct help. In our 6 larger offices, retaining directly staffed days in response to current demand would mean that staff are helping between 4 and 6 customers per hour which is on par with requirements of staff in the Customer Service Centre. Since the public consultation we have approached the delivery partners at our smaller rural sites over the possibility of them retaining the customer service self-serve equipment for local use.
- 6.6 A statistical analysis and more detailed consultation feedback is attached at Appendix 1 of this report.

7.0 Proposals for a revised face to face service

- 7.1 Consultation replies suggested that reductions in service might adversely affect older residents who preferred to use a face to face office. Whilst there is evidence supporting use of this service by older residents we also know that far larger numbers of our older residents from across the County, both from areas that do have a nearby office and from areas that do not, use the Customer Service Centre to access the same services and with a high level of satisfaction.
- 7.2 Looking at those services that older residents are most likely to access, over the same quarter, where face to face help 1800 people with Bus Pass renewals, CSC helps 2900. Where face to face helps 590 people with Blue Badge enquiries, CSC helps 2900 and where face to face helps 700 people to report highways and environmental issues, CSC helps 5200.
- 7.3 In addition, and significantly, access to services through the CSC is more seamless, providing more holistic help for vulnerable customers through working with adult's and children's services and providing help with homelessness and issues caused by welfare reform. Digital redesign and

simplification of services will not only aid those able to go online, the services provided by CSC contact advisers and the efficiency with which they will be able to handle diverse requests will also be greatly enhanced.

- 7.4 In view of the available alternatives to face to face, the proposal is to retain a reduced service at the six main offices in Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Market Drayton, Whitchurch, Ludlow and Bridgnorth in order to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. Offices will still be open across the week, the number of days where staff are on site will reduce but self-service facilities will remain available throughout the week.
- 7.5 Opening days and times have been considered against a number of factors including the need for a smaller team of advisers able to cover different offices as well as providing for the busiest days per site where possible. **Appendix 1** of this report details on a site by site basis the customer numbers and busy days and times and the resulting recommendations for changes to opening that will deliver a more sustainable service using this optimum sized team operating across multiple sites.
- 7.6 The Equality and Social Inclusion Impact Assessment in respect of these proposals is reproduced at **Appendix 2**.
- 7.7 Having originally consulted on opening times of 9 am to 4.45 pm across all main sites, the proposal for these offices, taking into account the comments raised are as detailed below.

Office	Current opening times	Proposed recommended opening times
Bridgnorth	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	Monday Staffed 9.30 to 5.00 Tuesday Open for self-serve Wednesday Staffed 9.30 to 5.00 Thursday Building closed Friday Open for self-serve
Ludlow	Monday 9.30 – 5.00 Tuesday 9.30 – 5.00 Wednesday 9.30 – 5.00 Thursday CLOSED Friday 9.30 – 5.00	Monday Open for self-serve Tuesday Staffed 9.30 to 5.00 Wednesday Open for self-serve Thursday Building closed Friday Staffed 9.30 to 5.00
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	Monday Open for self-serve Tuesday Open for self-serve Wednesday Staffed 9.30 to 5.00 Thursday Open for self-serve Friday Staffed 9.30 to 5.00
Market Drayton	Monday 10.00 – 3.00 Tuesday 10.00 – 3.00 Wednesday 10.00 – 4.00	Monday Open for self-serve Tuesday Open for self-serve Wednesday Staffed 9.30 to 4.45 Thursday Open for self-serve

	Thursday 10.00 – 4.00 Friday 10.00 – 4.00	Friday Open for self-serve
Shrewsbury	Monday 9.00 - 5.00 Tuesday 9.00 – 4.00 Wednesday 9.00 – 4.00 Thursday 9.00 – 4.00 Friday 9.00 – 5.00	Monday Staffed 9.30 to 5.00 Tuesday Open for self-serve Wednesday Open for self-serve Thursday Staffed 9.30 to 5.00 Friday Open for self-serve
Whitchurch	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	Monday Open for self-serve Tuesday Open for self-serve Wednesday Open for self-serve Thursday Staffed 9.30 to 4.45 Friday Open for self-serve

7.8 Opening times and in some cases closing days for some offices are imposed by library operating times. We will take steps to ensure that access to self-service facilities in the shape of customer freephones and public computers is maximised and will look to the developing multi-service hubs as possibilities for alternative service location.

7.9 The proposal for the 9 smaller offices at Albrighton, Bishop’s Castle, Broseley, Church Stretton Town Council, Church Stretton Health and Wellbeing Centre, Cleobury Country, Ellesmere, Shifnal and Wem is to decommission the support contracts with operating partners. All partners have been approached with the offer of retaining the free phone and public computer to be maintained at Shropshire Council’s expense in order that a means of free contact remains available locally. Negotiations regarding this are continuing.

8.0 Next steps

8.1 Should these recommendations be accepted by Cabinet we will ensure a suitable lead-in period during which arrangements will be made with our working partners to minimise impact on them. Over the same timespan we will ensure that customers are aware of the changes to opening days and that access to the alternatives of telephony and online self-service is clearly signposted with appropriate instructions on use.

8.2 HR advice has been sought over the impact of these proposals on staff and an appropriate period of staff consultation will take place prior to implementing any changes. To retain expertise, alternative positions within Customer Services will be offered to displaced staff with redundancies considered where these alternatives are not considered reasonable.

8.3 As digital transformation and redesign continues, we will continue to develop new self-service channels and equipment, making it easier for our customers to do business with us and supporting the cost effectiveness of our delivery at a time of reducing resources. A project to develop more integrated self-service

terminals through which those less confident with online applications can be supported and which brings together our different communication channels in

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

Agenda item 122, Cabinet 10 January 2018, Financial Strategy 2018/19 to 2022/23

Cabinet Member:

Cllr Steve Charmley, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Support

Local Members:

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

Appendices:

Appendix 1 - Site by site usage and recommendations for revised opening hours

Appendix 2 – Equality and Social Inclusion Impact Assessment

one place is already well progressed.

