



**Committee and Date**

Performance Management Scrutiny Committee

1<sup>st</sup> March 2023

Item

Public



## Green Paper on Aligning our Customer Services and the Drive to Digital – GREEN PAPER

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<b>Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder):</b>	Cllr Rob Gittins, Culture & Digital

### 1. Synopsis

This report details a proposal to consult with the public on shortening the opening hours of our customer service centre to support the council's ICT and Digital Strategy, support the shift to more digital services for our customers whilst continuing to provide an adequate telephone channel as an alternative, and repurpose Customer Service Adviser capacity freed up by any change to preventative outbound customer contact.

### 2. Executive Summary

2.0 The Shropshire Plan sets out our priorities around Healthy People and Healthy Organisation both of which are considered within this report. We are committed to ensuring our resources are aligned to the delivery of our strategic outcomes and this includes ensuring we have strong communication with our communities and people, improved access to our services on a 24/7 basis and being proactive, where we can, with those members of our society who need more tailored help or support. Subject to further review, as the Council's online service offer grows, it is initially proposed that the opening times of the Customer Service Centre ("CSC") are reduced as described in this report to help free up staff to focus time helping those we identify as being most in need. This will generate service efficiencies through greater use of online services. We recognise the challenges some residents will have around digital exclusion and these will remain a consideration of

any proposals for reduced opening. Additionally, through using outbound calling, this will also support a more preventative and proactive targeting of advice and information to residents with additional care and support needs before they experience crisis, identifying opportunities for early help and preventative services, particularly for health and wellbeing.

2.1 The council's CSC handles public contact for over 50 council departments including specialist services such as Adults and Children's concerns, Homelessness and Local Welfare fund alongside many more transactional service requests such as Highways, Waste, Registrars and Planning. Current opening times are 8am to 6pm on Monday to Friday and 9am to 1pm Saturdays, a total of 54 hours per week. Outside of these hours, and over all public holidays, an out of hours services for emergency only issues is handled in-house via the council's CCTV team.

2.2. As the Council's online services continues to develop, it is recommended that we balance the cost of continuing to provide a full telephony service against encouraging Shropshire's residents to access online services and information, achieving the same outcome in many cases with higher levels of useful information available to the Council at a considerably lower cost. The estimated cost of each telephone call is £2.83, compared to £0.15 per online transaction.

2.3 This report proposes a period of public consultation with Shropshire residents on a reduction in CSC opening times to around 30 hours per week, Monday to Friday. The options to achieve this are outlined in Appendix 2 to this report. A change in opening times, supported by pre-recorded customer advisory messages on appropriate lines towards an expanding online offer, would help to encourage more residents to transact with the council online and would also support the Healthy People priority of the Shropshire Plan, through freeing capacity in the CSC to support more proactive outbound calls. These calls would target those residents most likely to need early support that may prevent greater call on council and health services at a later date.

2.4 The proposed changes would affect only the more generalist non-emergency service requests handled by the CSC. The opening times of other more complex Council services, including First Point of Contact for Adults and Children's Services, homelessness calls, or calls to the Local Welfare Support Team for financial support, would not change. These teams would work seamlessly to support with any issues identified through outbound contact, so strengthening the CSC's ability to assist the Healthy People priority

### 3. Recommendations

#### Members are asked to

3.1. Consider, challenge, and comment on the proposals in this report for revised CSC opening times that will support the Council's strategy of a Digital First approach for delivering and commissioning services now and in the future, whilst also continuing to support delivery via traditional channels for those residents best served in this manner.

3.2. Consider the range and sufficiency of the intended consultation with the public on the range of proposals for reducing opening hours.

# Report

## 4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

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

Risk	Mitigation plans in place
Residents may perceive this as a loss of service	<p>These proposed changes have the intention of encouraging, wherever possible and wherever people are able, the adoption of online services particularly for more transactional type service requests. In addition, they will ensure that a phone service remains available during the times, evidenced through current data, as the most popularly used times of the day, for those residents unable to self-serve online.</p> <p>Ongoing monitoring would help to identify any disproportionate impact and the CSC would work closely with Shropshire Local sites, as the Council's community presence, to ensure residents have recourse to help and support to transact with us in person if required as well as offering access to digital upskilling classes where desired.</p>
Initially, calls to CSC may continue at current levels but within some reduced service times leading to increased wait times and call abandonment	<p>The recorded greetings that customers hear when calling CSC will continue to play varying messages, reminding and promoting online services as an alternative. These will alter depending upon how long a caller waits. These will be periodically reviewed to ensure that callers are signposted to report issues online, leaving telephone contact for those residents unable to access use online services</p>
Some Shropshire households may not have, or be able to use, online services, through choice, ability, financial or other reasons	<p>Research suggests that the Covid 19 pandemic has dramatically altered the digital landscape in the UK. When the Consumer digital Index, the UK's largest study of digital and financial lives, began its research into digital exclusion in 2016 it suggested that 89% of the UK population reported having been online in the preceding 3 months. The 2022 update reports that this figure increased significantly with 99% saying they had been online in the previous 3 months. Further, that 65% reported having tried new activities online and 90% saying they had continued that activity. This is encouraging but we recognise the digital divide and the potential for the cost-of-living crisis to impact Shropshire households therefore any proposal for revised opening times would seek to continue to provide a telephone-based service for those who might otherwise be</p>

	<p>excluded, retaining around 55% of current opening hours with these purposefully matched to the times we know most customers contact us.</p> <p>An Equality, Social Inclusion and Health Impact Assessment (ESHIA) initial screening record has been completed ahead of the proposed consultation exercise; this is at Appendix 3 of this report.</p> <p>This ESHIA will be revisited and revised as necessary once the outcome of any consultation is known.</p>
<p>Risk that missed conversations may equate to failure to identify more significant issues at an early stage, particularly for more vulnerable residents</p>	<p>The proposed changes affect only the more transactional non urgent service-based requests and queries that Customer Services handle, not the more in-depth calls such as Social Care, Welfare Support or homelessness. Urgent issues, including urgent Highways reporting issues, will still be picked up through the out of hours service.</p> <p>In addition, any change in opening times would help to free up the resource to make outbound calls to residents we identify as having care or support needs, helping to identify potential problems and target support and advice before these become more serious issues.</p>
<p>Council's online offer is incomplete for some services</p>	<p>The CSC will remain open and numbers for services published. The Council's webpages are being amended to promote online transactions first, but contact numbers will remain available for those that need this service. Where there are gaps in our online provision, phone numbers will be more prominent and recorded customer greetings will reflect this.</p>
<p>Closing call lines earlier in the day could place additional demand on our out of hours response and adversely affect the Council's ability to respond to emergencies such as floods and seasonal variances such as Elections issues and school admissions</p>	<p>Retaining CSC staff who are then repurposed to other duties will allow us, with appropriate permission, to pull this resource back in to handle any unexpected or seasonal variances</p>

## 5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. The financial advantage of online solutions rather than telephone contact are explained in paragraph 2.2 above, and again in paragraph 7.2 below. The expectation is that the cost of transferring the resulting staff time into making outbound contacts will be met from grants and other funding sources, therefore we do not expect any redundancies within CSC as a result of this change. Depending on the eventual level of opening hours adopted, we would anticipate a reduction in budgets of approximately £93,000. This excludes any financial benefit from customers using lower cost contact methods.

## 6. Climate Change Appraisal

6.1. There are no direct implications for climate change as a result of this report and full implications and considerations of climate change as a result of any changes to the approved approach will be reviewed at that time.

## 7. Background

7.1. Since Shropshire Council introduced the strategy of “channel shift” for customer contact (Shropshire Council Customer Strategy 2012/2013) the CSC has seen a steady reduction in telephone contact across many services with an increase in customers contacting the CSC either by using online forms, social media or via webchat embedded in the council’s webpages.

7.2. There are a number of reports in the public domain that define differing costs per transaction per different channel of customer contact. The cost figures reproduced below are taken from SOCITM’s 2012 report “*The potential for channel shift in local Government*” These figures will doubtlessly have increased over time but are accepted as a benchmark figure.

Contact channel	Face to Face	Telephone	Online Transaction
Cost per transaction	£8.62	£2.83	£0.15

7.3. Therefore, the potential cost savings to the council of continuing to build and encourage the use of accessible and convenient online alternatives in place of telephone calls to request services are tangible. We nevertheless recognise the fact that some residents may not be able to transact online, some online offers are in development or not complete and in some cases, residents may need to pursue transactions or service requests already submitted.

7.4. The Covid-19 pandemic has done much to transform the digital landscape in the UK. For example, among 50–70-year-olds, three quarters (75%) say they were making video calls more often during lockdown and three in ten (31%) said they were emailing more than they did before the pandemic struck. A survey by Lloyds Bank found that three times more 70-year-olds registered for online banking during lockdown compared to the same time last year.

7.5. However, against this, the same research suggests that people in mid to later life are at greater risk of being digitally excluded. Those who are not online are not just older, they are also likely to be in worse health, be on lower incomes and have lower educational attainment. 71% of those offline have no more than a secondary education, and nearly half (47%) are from low-income households.

*(Source: Centre for Ageing Better report: How has Covid 19 changed the landscape of digital inclusion)*

7.6. Therefore, the proposal to review the opening times of the CSC seeks to provide a reasonable compromise between these issues: the council’s online offer is now wider and more complete than it was but there still needs to be an alternative offer to avoid excluding those residents unable to use online services.

- 7.7. Appendix 1 to this report illustrates the profile of the volume of calls received by CSC against current opening times, plus the number of calls potentially displaced by the proposals for opening times. These profiles show a markedly fewer customer contacts early in the day and again later in the afternoon.
- 7.8. This is a trend that has also always been apparent in the number of customers presenting at Face-to-Face sites. Historical profiling of customer contact in Library based Customer Service Points displayed markedly lower customer footfall prior to 9am and again after 3pm and recent figures from Shropshire Local suggest that only 18% of customers access sites after 3pm.
- 7.9. The proposals for revised opening times for the CSC factor in this variation in customer contact times so that in practice, an opening hours reduction across the week totalling 45% of current hours would in no way displace an equivalent percentage of customers. Such a proposal would displace between 24 and 27% of customer contact.

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

**Local Member:**

All - Changes to customer service centre opening times has the potential for a County wide impact affecting all local members.

**Appendices**

Appendix 1 – profile of average call volumes to CSC throughout current opening times and the potential displacement of calls with revised opening times  
Appendix 2 – Proposals for revised CSC opening times  
Appendix 3 - Equality and Social Inclusion Impact Assessment

## Average daily, weekly and monthly calls to the Customer Service Centre (CSC) and potential effect of shorter opening

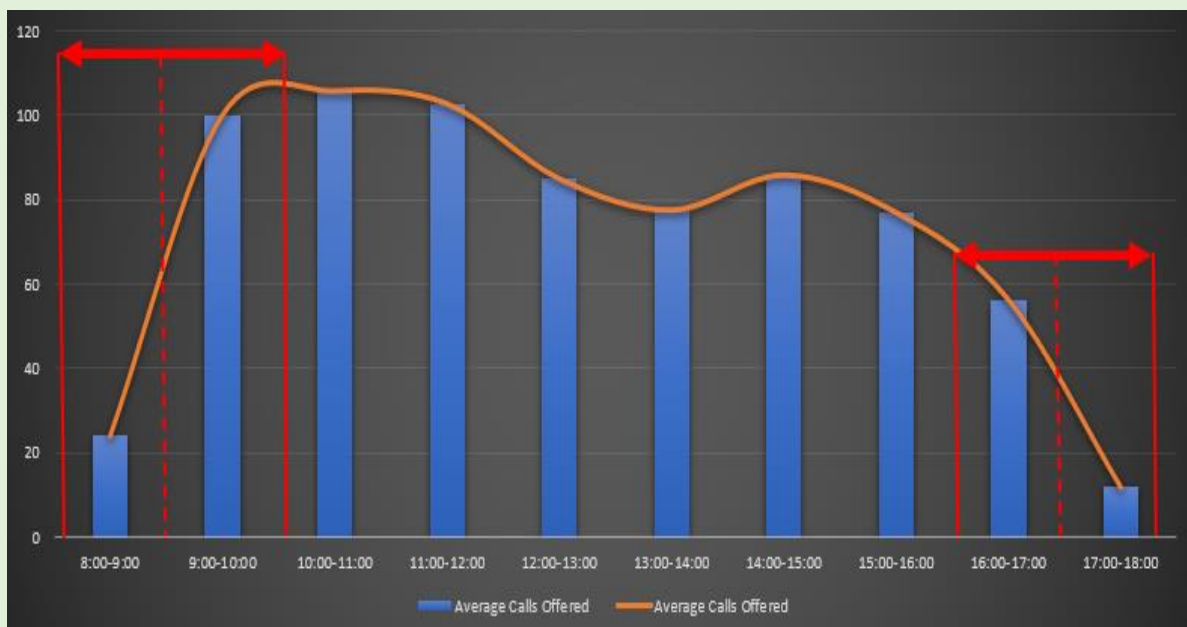
Note – in these visuals, the blue bars represent the number of phone calls received during each hourly slot CSC is open. The red divisions illustrate the volumes of calls potentially affected by revised opening times.

Analysis of calls in a typical week would suggest that the majority of calls affected by revised opening hours would be for Waste services (37% of total calls in that week), general enquiries (15% of total calls), Highways issues (14% of total calls) and Registrar’s Services (8% of total calls)

This can vary considerably during expected seasonal peaks for example around elections issues, school admissions and especially during major events such as flooding.

**Table 1**

Average calls received throughout the day (Period 1 January to 31 August 2022)



The average number of calls over a normal day over the period is 725

Revising CSC opening times to 9am to 5pm would affect around 36 calls

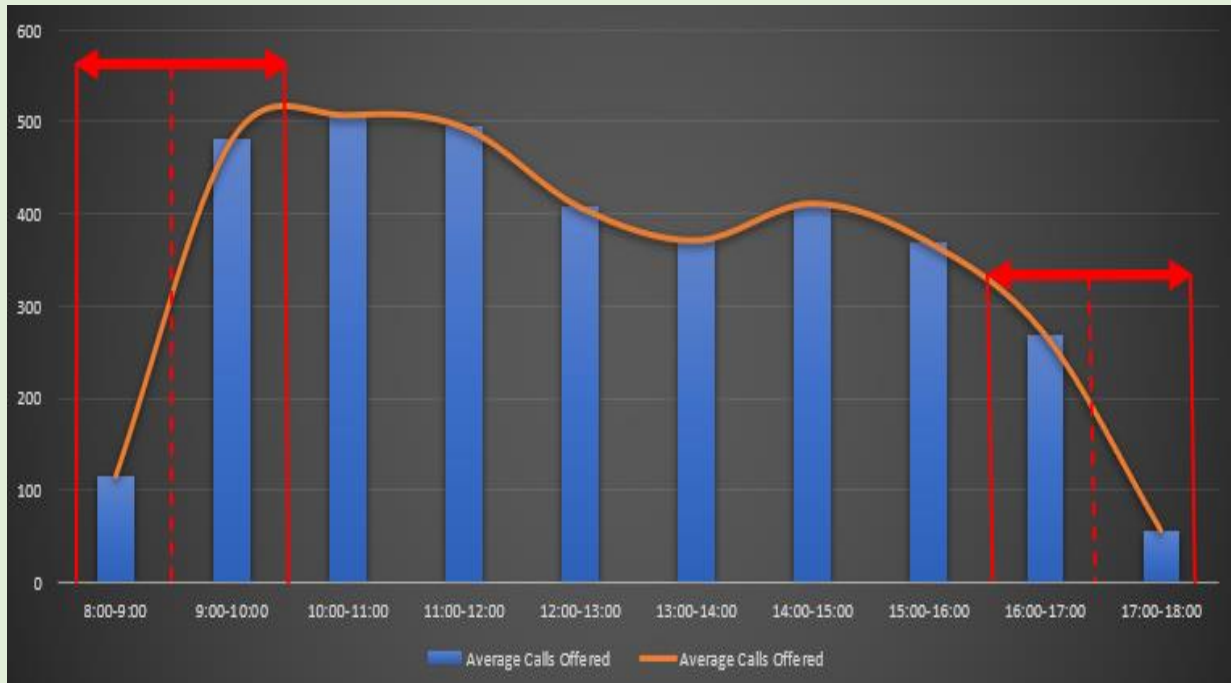
Revising CSC opening times to 9am to 4pm would affect around 92 calls

Revising CSC opening times to 9am to 3pm would affect around 170 calls

Revising CSC opening times to 10am to 4pm would affect around 192 calls

**Table 2:**

Average number of calls received over a week (Period 1 January to 31 August 2022)



The average number of calls over a normal week in the period is 3486

Revising CSC opening times to 9am to 5pm would affect around 182 calls

Revising CSC opening times to 9am to 4pm would affect around 442 calls

Revising CSC opening times to 9am to 3pm would affect around 810 calls

Revising CSC opening hours to 10am to 4pm would affect around 923 calls

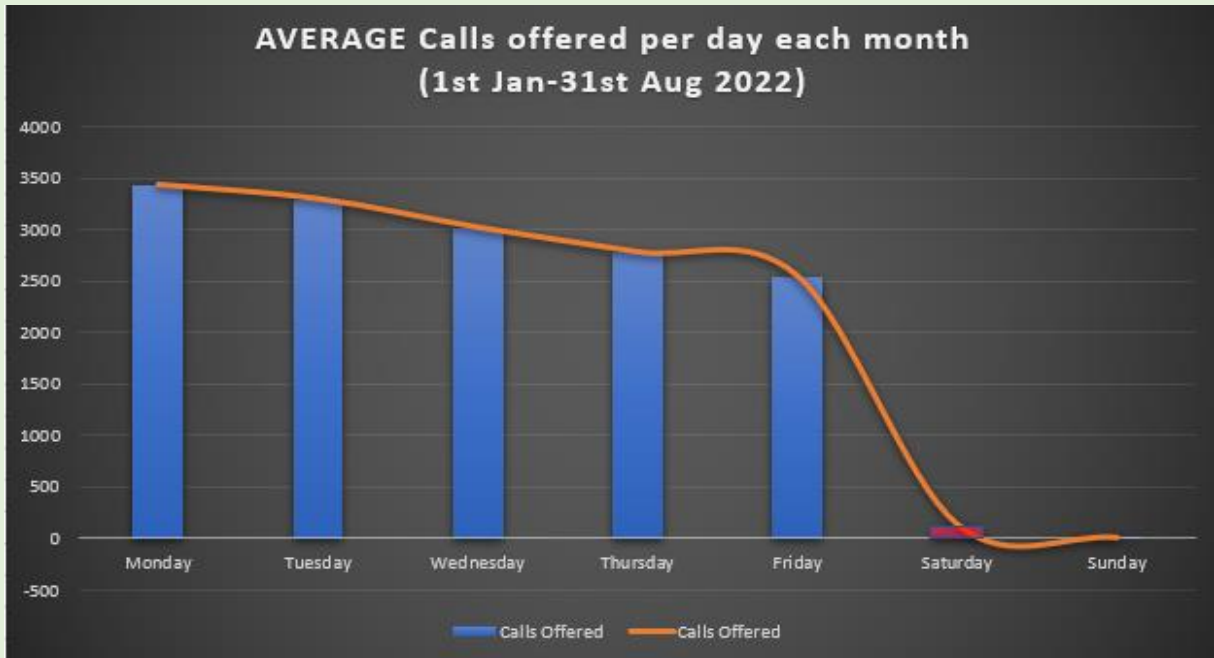
**The graphs above are average figures, there are weeks and months where seasonal peaks occur and numbers will be higher as a result.**

There is a marked profile to the contacts received throughout the day with the bulk of calls occurring between 9am and 3pm.

In practice therefore, opening later and closing earlier each day minimises the effect on customers meaning a reduction to 30 hours per week, around 55% of current opening hours, would displace around 24 to 27% of calls.



**Table 3:**  
Average call profile over a working week for CSC



This graph illustrates the typically busiest days for call volumes across the working week, in particular the very low levels of calls received on Saturday opening times of 9am to 1pm.

There are again seasonal variations that are down to service activities and in particular following bank holiday closures

## Options for consultation: Revised Customer Service Centre opening times

### Option 1

**Monday to Friday 9am to 3pm, closed Saturdays. Total opening hours per week: 30 (55.5% of current opening times)**

#### Positives:

Uniform opening times more easily recognised by residents

Few calls are received before 9am therefore minimal disruption to calls in the morning

These opening times release up to 11 staff for 2 hours Monday to Thursday plus 10 staff for 2 hours on Friday, theoretically up to 108 staff hours to dedicate to preventative outbound calls in the afternoons.

#### Negatives:

Still relatively high numbers of calls currently received between 3pm and 5pm before they tail off, we would expect there to be a period of disruption for residents during this adjustment where waiting times will be longer.

Does not address the higher call numbers at the start of a week, again a period of adjustment for residents

No outbound calls envisaged prior to 9am

### Option 2

**Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm, closed Saturdays. Total opening hours per week: 30 (55.5% of current opening times)**

#### Positives:

Uniform opening times more easily recognised by residents

Releases up to 11 staff for one hour a day Monday to Thursday and 10 staff for one hour Friday, theoretically up to 54 staff hours to dedicate to preventative outbound calls – (afternoons only)

#### Negatives:

Disruption to relatively high call numbers between 9am and 10am, risk that these calls may then present at 10am leading to long wait times in the morning. Possible disruption for residents over a period of adjustment.

Outbound calls prior to 10am is possible but success rate and effectiveness is questionable.

Far fewer staff hours available each week to make preventative outbound calls.

### Option 3

**Monday and Tuesday 9am to 3.30pm**

**Wednesday and Thursday 9am to 3pm**

**Friday 10am to 3pm**

**Total opening hours per week: 30 (55.5% of current opening times)**

#### Positives:

Slightly longer opening times Monday and Tuesday attempt to address higher call levels earlier in the week

Releases up to 11 staff for 1.5 hours Monday and Tuesday, 11 staff for 2 hours Wednesday and Thursday and 10 staff for 2 hours on Fridays, theoretically 97 hours a week to dedicate to preventative outbound calls.

**Negatives:**

Opening times may not be easy for residents to remember

Still some possible disruption to calls attempted after 3/3.30pm meaning a period of adjustment for resident.

Outbound calls prior to 10am on the Friday is possible but success rate and effectiveness is questionable

**Option 4**

**Monday and Tuesday 9am to 5pm**

**Wednesday to Friday 9am to 3pm**

**Total opening hours: 34 (63% of current opening hours)**

**Positives:**

Longer opening times on Monday and Tuesday address attempt to higher call volumes at the start of the week.

Minimal disruption to calls in the mornings

Potentially easier opening pattern for residents to remember

Releases up to 11 staff for 2 hours Wednesday and Thursday and up to 10 staff on Friday, theoretically 54 staff hours per week for outbound calls

**Negatives:**

Still some possible disruption to calls attempted after 3pm Wednesday to Friday

Far fewer staff hours available each week to make outbound preventative calls. Possible bias towards transactional calls over outbound wellbeing calls

Only able to make outbound calls later in the week