

**Committee and Date**Cabinet  
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Item

Public



# Aligning our Customer Services and the Drive to Digital – A Review of Customer Service Opening Hours

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## 1. Synopsis

Changes to the opening times of Customer Service Centre's general call lines will support the Council's Digital Strategy, modernisation of customer access to services through convenient online routes and will free up adviser time for preventative outbound calling.

## 2. Executive Summary

As the Council's online service offer grows, the opening times of the Customer Contact Centre are reduced to help free up staff to focus time helping those most in need through targeted outbound calling and generating service efficiencies.

2.1. The Council's Customer Service Centre (CSC) handles public contact for over 50 council departments included in which are specialist services such as Adults and Children's concerns, Homelessness and Local Welfare fund and also many more transactional service requests such as Highways, Waste, Registrars and Planning.

- 2.2. The CSC is currently open 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 service for emergency only issues is now handled in-house via the council's CCTV team.
- 2.3. For some time, Council services have been building and developing their online solutions as a 24/7 alternative to phone calls to request specific services. However, alongside this, the Customer Service Centre has remained open, providing an alternative to online contact methods over an extended day, and for Saturday mornings, providing a service regardless of alternatives and demand. During the pandemic, the focus of the CSC shifted in that it increasingly provided outbound calling, targeting those residents most in need of support.
- 2.4. The Council's online offer continues to develop, this includes both improvements to the functionality of our website and also the development of automatic call agents that may replace the need for a human conversation in some of our more general transactions. It is recommended therefore, that to help find efficiencies, we balance the cost of continuing to provide a full telephony service against the encouragement needed for Shropshire's residents to consider online alternatives to request services and information, that is available online and achieves the same outcome in many cases. The estimated cost to the Council of each telephone call for a Council service is £2.83, compared to £0.15 per online transaction.
- 2.5. A change in opening times would help encourage more residents to transact with the council online, whilst also freeing capacity in the CSC to support more outbound calling targeted to residents most in need and to help early interventions that may prevent greater call on council and health services at a later date. This additional work would be funded by separate Public Health grants.
- 2.6. The proposed changes would affect only the more generalist service requests handled by the CSC. The opening times of the First Point of Contact for Adults and Children's Services, homelessness calls, or calls to the Local Welfare Support Team who deal with more complex, vulnerable and in depth personal and financial needs would not change.
- 2.7. Once agreed, the revised opening times for inbound telephone contact may be used to influence other opening times across wider Council services.
- 2.8. Therefore, following the presentation of a Green Paper to Performance Management Scrutiny Committee on 1 March 2023 in which the proposals and rationale were explained, a public consultation took place to gauge opinion on a number of options to reduce the opening times of the CSC to around 30 hours per week.
- 2.9. This consultation ran between 13 March and 23 April 2023 and was made available to as wide a range of residents as possible using the council's website, paper copies available at numerous libraries across the County, via a customer helpline through which paper copies could be requested and via social media, press coverage and broadcast on Radio Shropshire. In addition, every customer calling the CSC heard a recorded message informing them of the consultation and every customer using Shropshire Local was similarly informed. From this we are confident that over 25,000 residents who contacted us during the consultation period were made directly aware.

- 2.10. A total of 381 consultation replies were received and a full analysis of these is at appendix 3 of this report.
- 2.11. The outcome of the public consultation was inconclusive there being no clear majority for any one option presented however 66% (210) of respondents did support change in some form. 44% (171) of respondents offered their own alternative proposals to those suggested however most of these proposals were around remaining the same or even opening for longer to support workers by opening early and closing late together with weekend opening. It should be noted however that the statistical data on calls to the CSC do not support this with only 3% of overall calls made before 9am, 1.4% of calls made after 5pm and less than 1% of calls made on Saturdays.
- 2.12. Notwithstanding this, the Customer Service Centre will, for a limited period of time, continue to provide a full day service up to 6pm on one night of the week to cater for any potential increased demand from working residents. The intention is to review call data and demand at the end of a three month period and to decide on the need to continue this provision in the light of that information.

### 3. Recommendations

That Cabinet:-

- 3.1. Agree the need to support the Council's drive to digital services by reducing CSC telephone service opening hours whilst still providing a telephone service for those residents unable to transact online.
- 3.2. Agree the revised opening times of the Customer Service Centre general calls as 9am to 3pm Monday to Friday, but with a trial period of opening of up to 6pm on one of those days in order to consider any change in the level of demand for later opening.
- 3.3. Delegate the implementation of these proposals to the Executive Director of Resources in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Culture and Digital.

## 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	These changes are proposed with the intention of encouraging people to use online services wherever possible and wherever they are able to, particularly for more transactional-type service requests, to help ensure that a phone service remains available for those residents unable to self-serve this way. To cater for this, the Customer Service Centre will remain open during the most popular times of the day, as evidenced by current user data, and that this is monitored to identify any

	disproportionate impact. 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.
Initially, calls to CSC may continue at current levels but within the reduced service times leading to increased wait times and call abandonment	The recorded customer greetings that callers hear already play varying messages to remind and promote online services as an alternative depending upon how long a caller waits. These have been, and will continue to be, revisited periodically to ensure that as many people as possible are reporting issues online, leaving telephone contact for those residents unable to access or use online services. To mitigate unacceptably long wait times, especially during known seasonal peaks in calls, the out of hours team will provide support to key service lines during daytime operations
Levels of digital exclusion in Shropshire are high (25%) and some residents may call CSC due to inability to use online services	Research suggests that 1 in 7 unable to use internet in the UK without assistance and in Shropshire this might equate to around 46,400 residents (source: 2021 census). However, this does not appear to be reflected in surveys of those calling the CSC. Data recorded by CSC over five months in 2022/23 asked customers why they were calling. Of 49,121 calls made, only 5% (2,448) of customers said they had called because they had no internet access.  Nevertheless, the Customer Service Centre will remain open for 55% of the current opening hours and during the the times when we know most contact is made.
Risk that missed conversations may equate to failure to identify more significant issues at an early stage, particularly for more vulnerable residents	The proposed changes affect only the generalist, more transactional side of Customer Services business handling more service-based requests and queries. This will not affect the first contact for Adults, Children's, Homelessness or Local Welfare Support calls where more in-depth calls that identify individual need are handled.  In addition, the proposed change in opening times would free staff resources to support outbound calling to more vulnerable residents that will help to identify potential problems and target support and advice before these become more serious issues
Council's online offer is incomplete for some services	The CSC will remain open and numbers published. The Council's webpages will be amended to promote online transactions first, but contact numbers will remain in case of difficulty. Where there are gaps in our online provision or where online services are missing, numbers will be more prominent. Separately a major initiative is now underway to further improve the council's online offer, particularly for those services that generate the most calls to CSC.
Closing call lines earlier in the day could place additional demand on our out of hours	Retaining staff who are then repurposed to other duties gives us the potential to seek permission to pull this resource back in to handle any unexpected or seasonal variances.

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	The expectation therefore is that sufficient CSC staff will remain on hand to support the Out of Hours service in the later afternoons, mitigating the risk of the out of hours service lines becoming overwhelmed.
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## 5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. As part of the medium term financial strategy potential efficiencies of £1.1m were identified from undertaking a review of the customer contact teams across the council, this includes channel shifting more transactions to online where possible to create more streamlined and cost-efficient responses.
- 5.2. The financial advantage of encouraging customers towards online solutions rather than telephone contact are explained in paragraph 2.4 above. The expectation is that the cost of transferring the resulting staff time into making outbound contacts will be met from grants, therefore we do not expect any redundancies within CSC as a result of this change. The level of opening hours recommended would result in a reduction in budgets of approximately £93,000 the final figure is still to be confirmed with finance partners.

## 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 Customer Service Centre 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 already carried out.
- 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 revise the opening times of the CSC is felt to be 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 different proposals for opening times upon which we consulted.

## 8. Next Steps

- 8.1. Should cabinet agree the above recommendations, the intention would be to introduce the revised opening hours at the earliest possible opportunity.
- 8.2. HR advice has been sought over the impact of these proposals on the work of the CSC generalist staff and staff themselves have been kept informed at all stages of development of this proposal. Other than a later opening time, there is little or no change to the times of work for most staff, the exception being around cover for Saturday working. Therefore, an appropriate period of consultation will be carried out with any affected staff.

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

**Local Member:**

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 – Analysis of public consultation feedback

Appendix 4 - Equality and Social Inclusion Impact Assessment

## Appendix 1

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

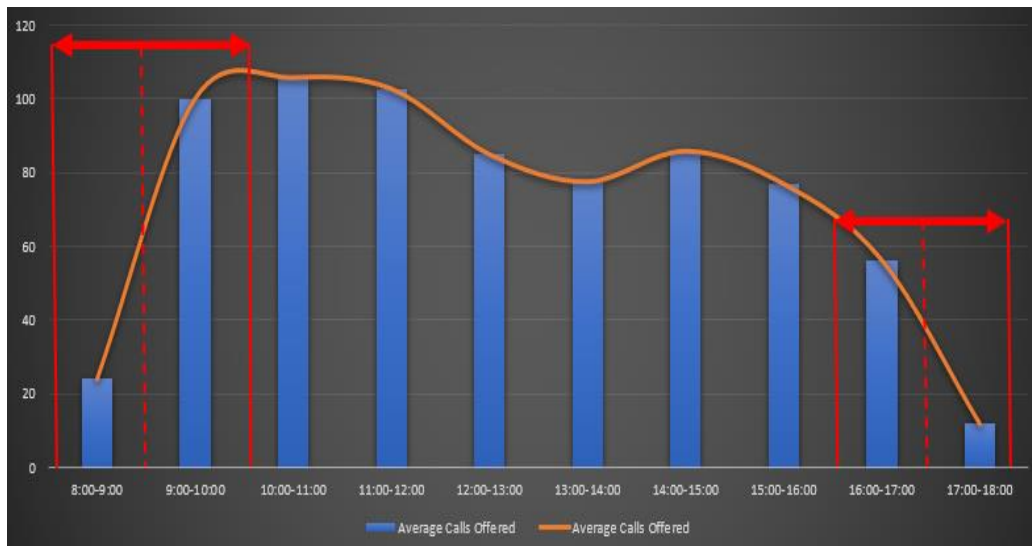
Note – in these visuals, the blue bars represent the number of phone calls received during each hourly slot CSC is open. The red divisions illustrate the volumes of calls potentially affected by revised opening times.

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

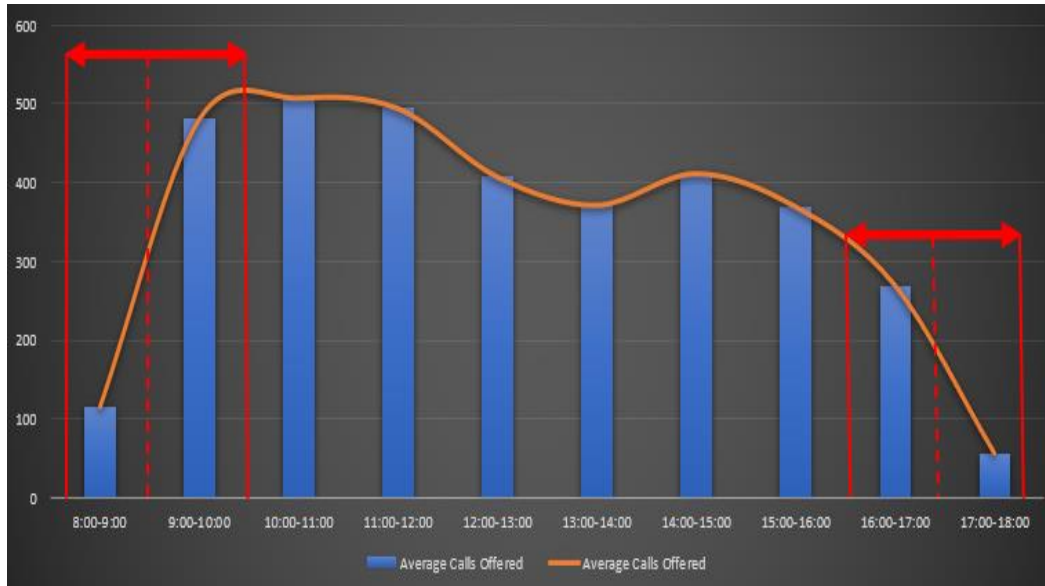
Revising CSC opening times to 9am to 3pm would affect around 170 calls

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)



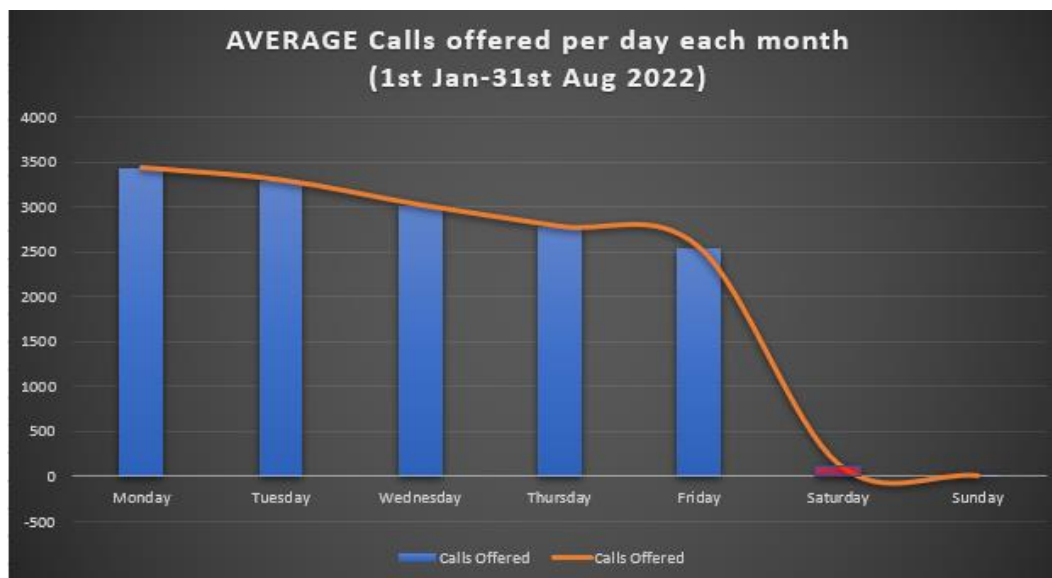
The average number of calls over a normal week in the period is 3486

- 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.**

**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

## Appendix 2

### Options consulted on: 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