

# Customer Service Centre Opening Hours Report

April 2023



# 1 Background and Methodology

Shropshire Council proposed changes to the times during which the Customer Service Centre would take generalist calls from customers. This is due to improvements to the council's website enabling the public to make simpler requests for council services at any time of the day or night, regardless of office hours. The council sought feedback on four options based on their analysis of call patterns during the day including offering an opportunity for the public to suggest alternatives if they did not agree with any of the given options. For the full proposals, background information and frequently asked questions provided by Shropshire Council alongside the survey itself, please see the appendix of this report.

The survey of eight questions was produced by Customer Services and the Shropshire Council Feedback and Insight Team and run using Survey Monkey and paper copies printed on request. In the analysis phase, the team considered qualitative questions, and major themes were identified from the feedback. For the presentation of data, percentages in tables the report uses values rounded to the nearest integer.

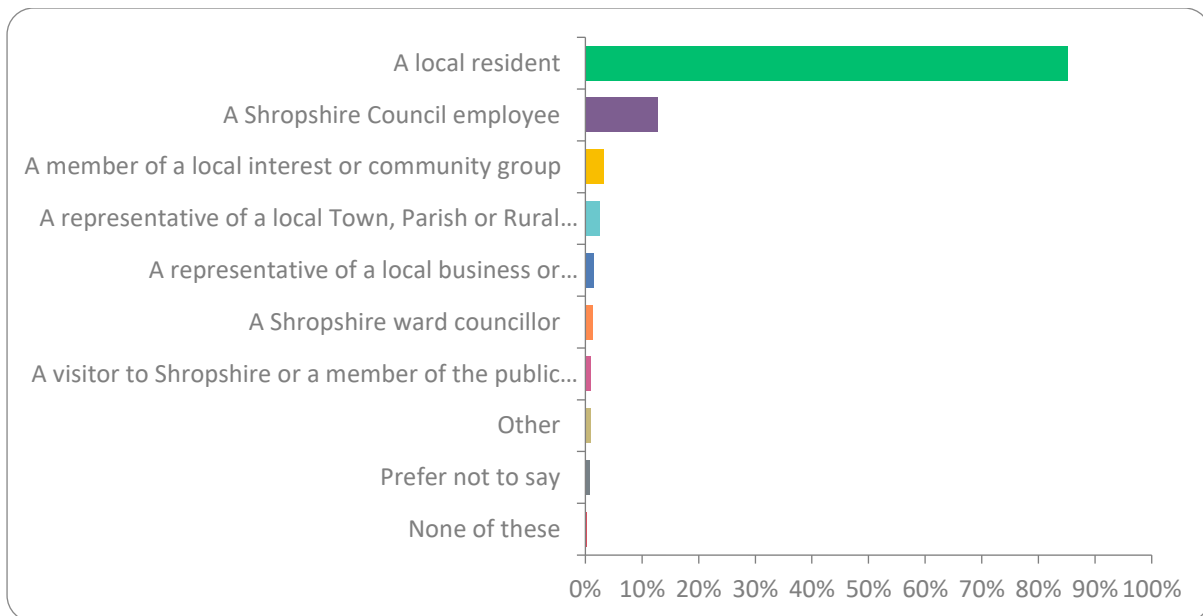
The report is broken down into various sections:

- Background & Methodology (this section)
- Demographics (Questions 3–4,6–8)
- Survey results (Questions 1–2, 5)
- Conclusions

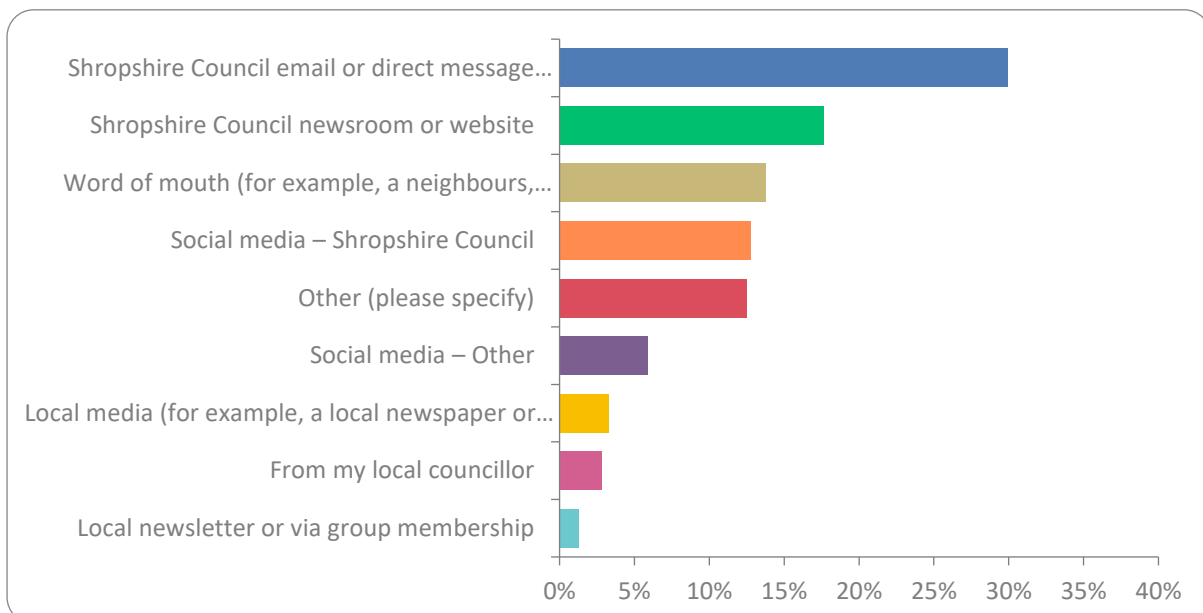
This engagement report has been designed to be shared with Customer Services and, on approval, published as a public document.

## 2 Demographics

393 people completed the survey. The vast majority of respondents completed this survey as local residents (85%) with Shropshire Council employees second (13%).



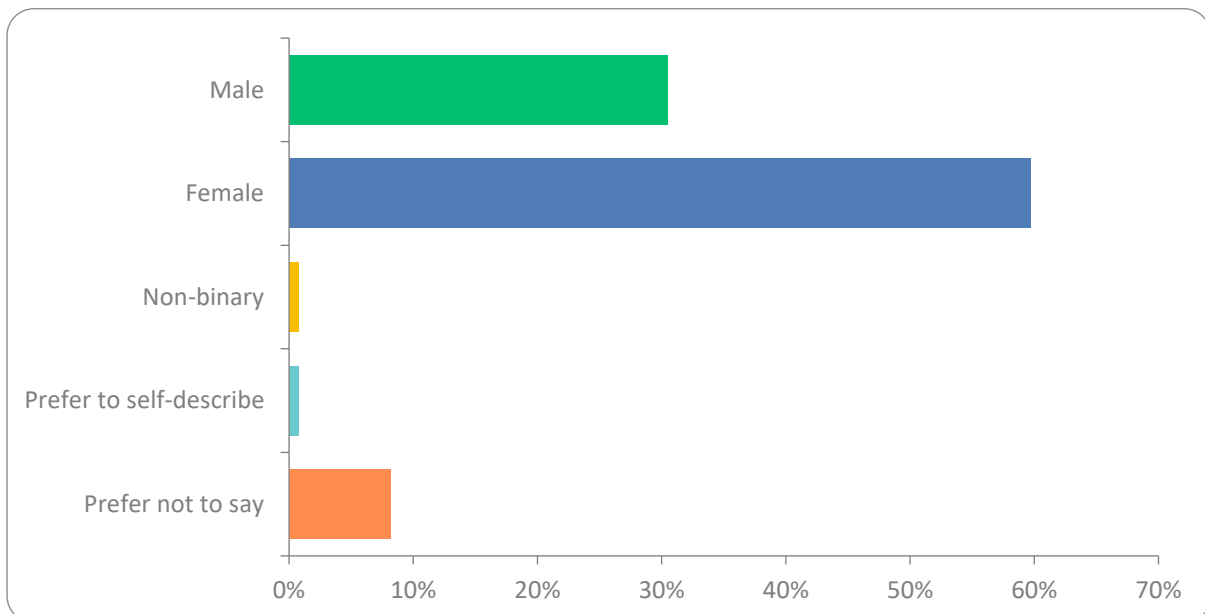
Most respondents found out about the survey through a Shropshire Council email or direct message contact (30%) followed by the Shropshire Council newsroom or website (18%), word of mouth (14%), and the council's own social media (13%).



The fifty respondents who selected “other” were asked to provide specifics. Twenty-nine people said they found out about the survey while on a phone call with customer services.

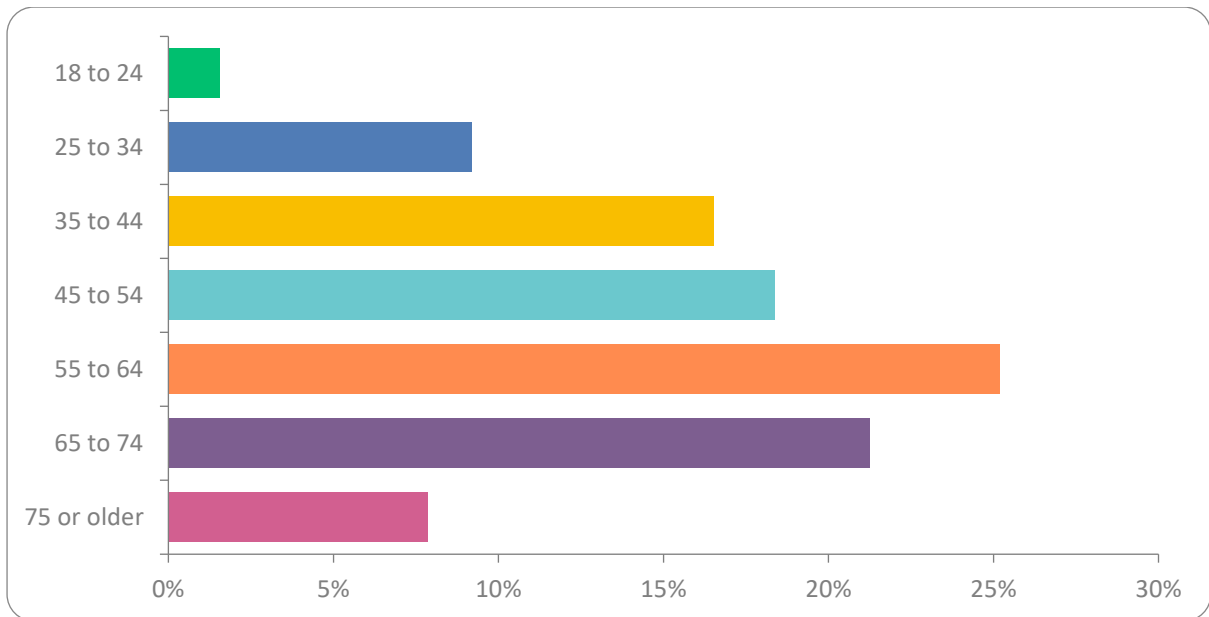
Theme	No	%
When calling Customer Services (told by employee)	29	58%
When calling - recorded message	8	16%
Social Media / online	5	10%
Word of mouth / friend	3	6%
Nextdoor	2	4%
Other	2	4%
Shropshire Local	1	2%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

The majority of respondents identified as female (60%).

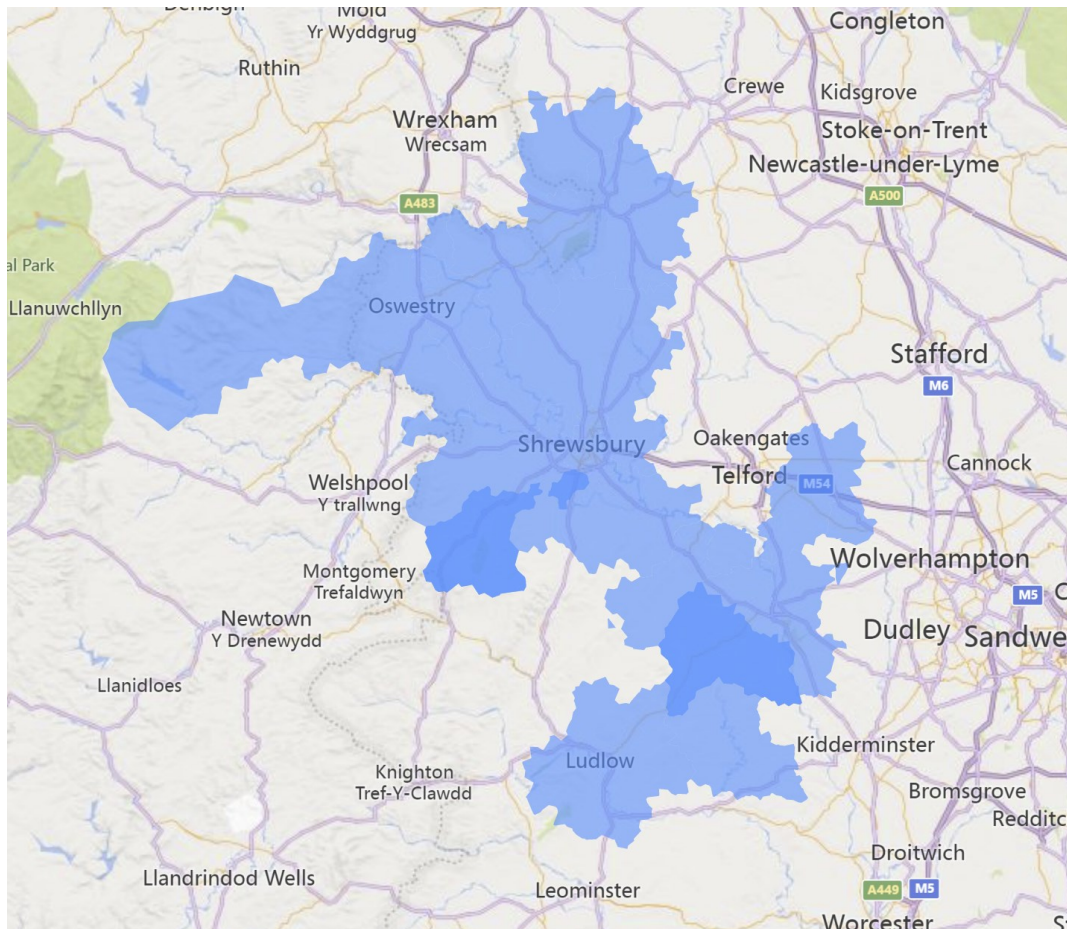


The majority of respondents (25%) were aged 55 to 64.



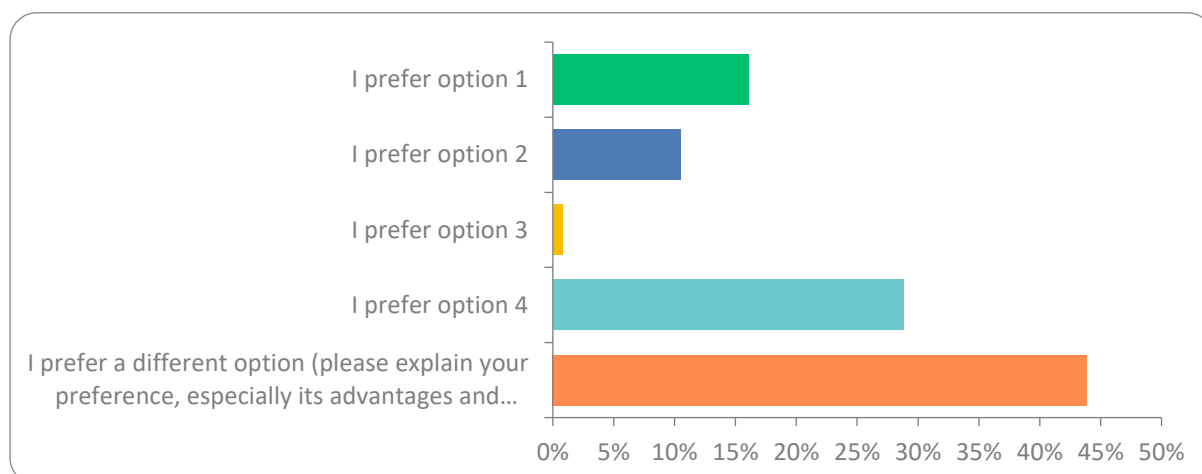


In terms of location, many parts of Shropshire were represented. There were also some responses from further afield including Greater Manchester and Kent.



### 3 Survey Results

Question1 asked respondents to select which of the given options they preferred. While 29% preferred option 4, far more (172 or 44%) stated they preferred a different option to those provided.



Those who preferred a different option were asked to explain their preference including its advantages and disadvantages. The majority (66%) felt that an option should include weekends and/or early morning/late evening times to accommodate those working full-time.

Theme	No	%
Include weekend / early morning/evening	66	35%
Standard Mon-Fri council hours (e.g., 9am-5pm)	53	28%
Maintain current hours	44	24%
General requests for more hours	12	6%
Other	11	6%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>100%</b>

Example comments:

*It is of no assistance to me that the service isn't available at least one evening per week until 6pm or a Saturday morning. I work full time (Mon-Fri).*

*I do not believe Customer Services should be reduced at all. I have spent some considerable time this morning just getting through. The Council provides a service that we pay for. As the efficiency of this council is already compromised, I feel this would be a retrograde step. I understand the need to balance budgets however*

*Shropshire has an ageing population. Many of our older residents and those more vulnerable, do not use the internet. Please consider them.*

*I would prefer standard opening hours for Customer Services, including maintaining the Saturday opening hours. Options 3 and 4 in particular are so confusing - people just want to speak to someone at a time to suit them, not work out whether it is a 3pm finish or a 3.30pm finish depending on which day of the week it is! The other thing to bear in mind, is that often (as an ex-employee myself) is that when people are actually put through to the officer, they say that they have "been on hold for 30 minutes". Any reduction in opening hours is therefore a huge retrograde step in my opinion - especially when Council Tax bills are being sent out, or elections are being held.*

*I prefer a council that I can get hold of in the phone when the information I need is not available online. I also need a council that deals with issues across all towns in the County not just Shrewsbury. In these uncertain times we need more support from our council not less.*

*It is imperative that the alternative online facilities are easy to use and responded to in a timely manner ideally within 24–48 hours.*

In question 2, respondents were then asked to add any further comments. The majority stated that there needed to be provisions for people working typical 9–5 jobs. Others shared concerns about poor or no internet access, that the online services were not of a good enough standard and that they preferred speaking to a person.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>%</b>
Consideration for people working Mon - Fri (9am-5pm)	43	22%
Other	24	12%
Many do not have internet access	23	12%
Online services are inadequate/need improvement	23	12%
Speaking on the phone preferred to online	21	11%
Simple hours better/staggered timings will cause confusion	16	8%
Do not cut services	14	7%
More, not less access needed to council services	12	6%
Need clear plan/signposting for emergency/out of hours assistance	11	6%
Reduced hours will lead to reduced quality of service	11	6%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100%</b>

Sample comments:

*Whilst I can use emails, our Internet provider has a problem, providing us with a steady Internet. It drops out frequently and hence the emails can go astray, or we can't send them! Our mobile phones have no reception in our house as we live in a dip. We use the landline frequently for this reason and this is the only way we can contact our council.*

*Online does not provide the same level of service as a person especially for elder residents.*

*Please think about people that work and people who need a support worker to be able to contact you.*

*In the other options what would happen on days when there are very high call volumes such as snow, ice, or floods? Would the staffing be able to be flexibly deployed to allow for support of seasonal peaks like these? If not, it could leave vulnerable people without a means of support.*

*The Customer Care Team should be available at the times currently available without reduction. Current waiting times when trying to get through are far too long at present as it is.*

*There has not been enough of an upgrade to the digital online provision to justify reducing call centre hours.*

*Cutting call hours is simply another way of making it even more difficult to get contact with the required department. The current trend towards more email and online use is just another way to delay dealing with your residents and cutting costs.*

*By having the same time Monday to Friday, it will not confuse the most vulnerable who are more likely to be using this service.*

*I can't understand why you are trying to change access to a service that is critical.*

*I seem to have phoned the council recently on two occasions between 3 and 5pm. I have been frustrated to find that the transport contingent had already gone home.*

In question 5, respondents were asked to give comments on diversity, equality, or social inclusion that they would like Shropshire Council to think about for customer services. Themes included problems of digital inclusion, the vulnerable, equal access to services across the county, working hours and that some of the options had non-regular timings making them hard to remember for people with learning difficulties and the elderly.



Theme	No	%
Digital inclusion a problem that this will compound	13	29%
Other	12	27%
This will have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable	11	24%
Access to services in some parts of the county are too low	4	9%
Hours outside M-F, 9-5 needed for working parents, people with inflexible jobs, etc.	3	7%
Odd timings are hard to remember for people with learning difficulties and the elderly	2	4%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>100%</b>

Sample comments:

*Such service changes are always detrimental to elder persons who are not so IT literate.*

*Please let's have equal money spent across the county, does not seem that way at the moment.*

*It will negatively affect disabled people, elderly people, and those who live in rural areas with little Internet access.*

*Changing times based on the days will be difficult for people with learning disabilities to understand and they are unlikely to attempt to call back if their first call during usual opening hours was unsuccessful.*

*Need a general "contact us" form (not service specific) to cater for those with hearing disabilities who cannot make a phone call. All the proposals discriminate against those in employment.*

*Please think about using all options for communication for deaf people, email, messages, texting, video calls, use of BSL online signers.*

## 4 Conclusions

The number of respondents who completed the survey was very encouraging. The quality of engagement was excellent. In particular, the open-ended questions produced some clear and valuable findings.

Most respondents (44%) preferred an alternative to the given prescribed options. The themes and sample comments give a good flavour of some of the underlying sentiments which include desires for:

- Recognition of people with inflexible or traditional 9–5 employment unable to use the telephone service during regular business hours.
- An option with standard Mon–Fri, 9–5 hours
- Maintaining current hours until the online services are brought up to a certain level of quality and,
- *More*, not fewer, customer service hours.

Of the prescribed options, option 4 was by far the most popular (29%).

Other comment themes worth paying attention to are:

- Lack of, or inadequate, internet access making using online services difficult
- The preference for speaking to someone
- Whatever the chosen option, a simpler way of thinking about timings to avoid confusion
- Again, a general sense of more, not less access needed to council services and certainly not cutting them.
- Clear plans/signposting for out-of-the-ordinary situations such as emergencies and out-of-hours assistance.
- A fear that reduced hours will lead to a reduction in service quality.

Finally, in terms of Equalities, Social and Health Impact Assessments (ESHIA) it is worth noting that people felt that:

- A reduction in customer services would lead to a compounding of pre-existing digital inclusion issues
- Have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable in society
- Timings might be difficult to remember for those with learning difficulties or the elderly because hours were not uniform across the work week
- Working parents needing hours outside of the traditional 9–5 workday
- Even before any customer service centre reductions, service access in some parts of the county is already too low.

# Appendix

## Customer Service Centre Opening Hours – Public Consultation

### What is this consultation about?

Shropshire Council's Customer Service Centre handles telephone and other forms of contact from our customers for around 50 different Council services. It is currently open from 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday and 9am to 1pm on Saturdays.

Some parts of our Customer Service Centre handle complex issues for Shropshire's residents, things like Adult Social Care, concerns for children, risk of homelessness or financial crisis affecting families and these types of contact from people will always need a skilled adviser and a telephone call to resolve them, but many other calls, to our more "generalist" side of our Customer Service Centre, are for relatively simple things that could be done another way, particularly using online requests.

Since we last looked at these opening hours, the council's website offer has developed considerably meaning that many people are now able to make simpler requests for council services at any time of the day or night, regardless of office hours.

We know also that making such requests online is a far more cost-effective way for us as a council to do things – it costs around £2.83 to handle a phone call but an online transaction might cost just £0.15, so doing more this way is much better for us as a council, especially when finances are difficult.

However we fully recognize that not everyone is able to go online and that sometimes, there is a need to speak to someone anyway for things to be able to progress so this is not a consultation about closing our Customer Service Centre, it is about us trying to balance the hours that we need to be open to help people with these "generalist" calls, with encouraging our customers to do more online so that we are handling service requests as efficiently as possible.

And there is one other advantage to encouraging more of our customers to do business with us online – it frees up time for our skilled advisers to concentrate on important preventative work for Shropshire residents and households that may be in need of additional support.

Throughout the difficulties of the Covid pandemic and its aftermath and now into the cost-of-living crisis, the Customer Service Centre has made tens of thousands of calls to Shropshire's residents to check they are coping, that they are safe and either getting the help they need or know how and where to find it. This is work we would like to do more of and considering the availability of better online services we now seek to reduce the opening times of the Customer Services Centre to free up staff time to concentrate on this important work.

The table below shows how the level of calls to these general service lines over the last four years.

Year ended	April 2018	April 2019	April 2020	April 2021	April 2022
Number of calls	200,462	193,952	177,846	213,026	178,302

### **What do I need to do?**

This document explains different options for new opening times for our generalist services together with the potential advantages and disadvantages of each and we are inviting you to give us your views on these options.

Please note that no formal decision has been made at this stage.

The information we receive through this consultation will be used to inform the decision on our future opening times.

We need you to answer the questions on the consultation form and return it to the office that supplied it.

If you can, you can complete the consultation online by going to [shropshire.gov.uk/get-involved](https://shropshire.gov.uk/get-involved) and searching for Customer Service Centre opening times consultation.

The potential impact of any changes on our customers has been assessed through completing an Equality, Social Inclusion and Health Impact Assessment. This is something that we complete to show that we have been fair when looking at the needs of customers, especially those who might be affected more by any changes.

You may find the information in our “Frequently Asked Questions” useful; copies are available to go with this consultation document.

### **What are we proposing?**

We are proposing changes to the times during which Customer Service Centre will take generalist calls from customers.

The different options and the advantages and disadvantages of each are laid out below.

### **Is there a recommendation or a preferred proposal?**

Yes, we do have a preferred option, and this is based on what we know about the pattern of phone calls we receive throughout the day together with how much staff time we could free up in return for shorter opening hours so that we can make more outbound calls to people with support needs.

Shropshire Council’s preferred proposal would be for our generalist lines to be open from 9am to 3pm Monday to Friday.

This is based on the fact that these opening times

- are regular and recognisable each day and therefore easier to remember.
- cover the majority of the working day and for the most popular times when we know we receive most of our calls.

- still represent around 55% of our current opening hours meaning we can still help anyone who is not able to do business online
- would free up around 100 hours per week for our advisers to do preventative work for people with support needs.

The survey questionnaire asks for your agreement, comments or otherwise on the different proposals or if you wish, to make an alternative suggestion.

The options to consider are listed below.

### **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 adjustment 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.
- May be possible to make outbound calls prior to 10am 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

## **Frequently asked questions**

These questions and answers may help to give you more information.

### **What Is Shropshire Council proposing?**

We are proposing shorter opening times for part of our Customer Service Centre which would still remain open for a total of at least 30 hours across weekdays. These changes are for our more general service calls and will not affect calls to Adult and Children's Social Care or calls about homelessness or to the Local Welfare Support line. They will affect calls to more transactional services such as Waste, Registrars, Parking, Education etc. where many people could instead do business online via [www.shropshire.gov.uk](http://www.shropshire.gov.uk)

### **Why is Shropshire Council doing this?**

It is some time since we last reviewed our opening times and since then we have seen changes in the level of calls we receive at different times of the day, also, more council services have now become available online and customer behaviours have changed with many more people choosing to do business online.

We need as many people as possible to do business with us online because the costs are so much lower, this is very important at a time when budgets are difficult, but we also need to continue to offer a telephone service to our residents who are not able to do things this way.

Also, in the aftermath of the Covid 19 pandemic and now also during the cost-of-living crisis, we believe we should be more proactive, reaching out to Shropshire residents who might be in need of help before things reach crisis point for them.

We need to do this without extra resources, so we feel that what we are proposing here is the best compromise between encouraging people to go online, reducing the hours we are open to take calls so that we still provide a telephone service through the busiest times of the day, whilst freeing up existing staff time to make much more proactive outbound contact with our more vulnerable residents.

### **How much money will this save?**

Revising our opening times will reduce the direct cost of staff time required to provide a phone service. We expect the cost reduction here to be around £93,000 but we will be reinvesting the same amount into making outbound calls which can create a much greater preventative return by helping people to stop needing council services in the first place.

### **What if I am not able to use online services?**

The Customer Service Centre will still be open for a good portion of the working day and for the most popular calling times. Anyone who is not able to use the Council's online service offer is still able to contact us.

### **Will I have enough time for my enquiry?**

Some of the enquiries we help with only take a short time, others may take longer. Our advisers will still deal with your enquiry as normal and as they do now.

**What if I need to report an urgent issue?**

As explained above, these changes to opening times only affect our more transactional service requests and for most of these it is reasonable if the contact centre is not available to wait until the next working day. For those able to go online, council services are available 24 hours.

There are some issues, for example, adults and children's concerns, highways issues requiring immediate response, homelessness, and car park lock-ins, where it is necessary to expect an urgent response. Calls like this will be handled through our out of hours team, but advisers will only deal with genuinely urgent issues through this service.

**How many days will you be open for?**

We expect to remain open between Monday to Friday but given the very small number of calls we now receive on a Saturday, the fact that most council departments are closed over the weekend, and the cost of maintaining a Saturday service to answer calls, we propose to stop opening the contact centre on a Saturday morning.

**What will happen to Customer Services staff?**

Changing our opening times for these service request lines will free up staff time as explained above. We will be using this time to have the same staff make outbound calls, being more proactive and reaching out to residents who may need some support.

**April 2023**

Analysis and reporting by:  
Feedback and Insight Team, Communications and Engagement, Resources  
Shropshire Council  
Email: [TellUs@shropshire.gov.uk](mailto:TellUs@shropshire.gov.uk)

Shropshire Council Lead Department: Customer Services

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