

REDUCTION OF OPENING HOURS – CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE

Relevant Portfolio Holder	Councillor John Fisher
Portfolio Holder Consulted	Yes
Relevant Head of Service	Amanda Singleton, Head of Customer Access and Financial Support
Ward(s) Affected	All
Ward Councillor(s) Consulted	N/A
Key Decision / Non-Key Decision	Non Key Decision

1. SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

- 1.1 This report sets out a proposal to reduce the opening hours of the Customer Service Centre at off peak times, specifically by not opening every Saturday, to enable the best use of resources at the times when customer demand is highest.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Executive Committee is asked to RESOLVE that:

- 2.1 The Customer Service Centre reduce Saturday opening hours to the first Saturday of each month, with effect from September 2016 in light of the low levels of customer demand, and to enable resources to be utilised more effectively at times when demand is highest.
- 2.2 Demand be reviewed and reported after 6 months to enable the Executive to consider future opening arrangements.

3. KEY ISSUES

Financial Implications

- 3.1 There would be a saving of approximately £7k per annum in the Customer Services budget. This is due to a reduction of 1/3rd of a full time post which would no longer be required. These hours are currently being held vacant pending a decision and therefore there would be no redundancy costs incurred.

Legal Implications

- 3.2 As Saturday opening arrangements form part of the staff contracts, formal staff consultation will be required before any changes could be implemented.

Service / Operational Implications

- 3.3 The Customer Service Centre is currently open Monday to Friday from 9am until 5pm, and on Saturday mornings from 9am until 12 noon. On Saturdays the centre is open for face to face customers only and a limited service is provided,

with the majority of customer making enquiries having to come back during the week to see a specialist.

- 3.4 Since first opening on Saturdays there has been considerable change both to the way that services are delivered, the number of services provided and to customer behaviour. The majority of Borough Council enquiries are dealt with by specialist officers, rather than the generic customer service team, and almost all County Council enquiries are now dealt with online or via a telephone call to the Worcestershire Hub in Worcester. Additionally there has been a 37% increase in payments being made via automated methods since 2012/13. This has resulted in a significant decrease in customers over time. There are now estimated to be half as many users of the Saturday service as there was 5 years ago.
- 3.5 Data for 2015/16 shows us the following information. This shows the customer numbers on a Saturday are very low in comparison with a normal working day.

	Enquiries	Payments
Total Saturday transactions for year	1,152	7,202
Average per Saturday	23	140
Average week day	228	1,067

- 3.6 62% of the enquires relate to Council Tax, Benefits or Housing. These enquiries require experts in these fields to properly deal with them. However, it is not cost effective to have expert staff available on a Saturday as the total transaction numbers each Saturday are so low. These customers are generally asked to return on the week in order to see a specialist member of the relevant team.
- 3.7 The majority of business on a Saturday morning is for the payments desk, but the data shows that this is 75% less than the customer volumes on an average morning in the week.
- 3.8 Our data shows that of the customers making payments on a Saturday 40% are paying by credit or debit card, or by cheque. This is a growing trend which is increasing year on year and we have seen a 90% increase in the number of card transactions since 2012/13. In April 2016 we saw 70% of customers paying by card. These customers could therefore easily make other arrangements to make their payments.

- 3.9 Of those paying by cash, national evidence suggests that the vast majority of these will in fact have bank accounts and it is a preference to pay cash in person.
- 3.10 Whilst there would be some inconvenience for customers who prefer to pay face to face on a Saturday morning, we do offer a very wide range of options to pay including 24 hour online and telephone payment facilities, via bank transfer, direct debits, standing orders, postal payments, payment card, or in person Monday to Friday.
- 3.11 Analysis of our data shows that our customer base on Saturdays is made up of regular customers who come in at least once a month. 40% of the payments made are by customers who visit the office multiple times in one month. 3% of the customers are coming in four or more times each month. Therefore, the number of individual customers using the service is less than the transaction numbers suggest. We estimate in the region of 600 people regularly use the service over the year.
- 3.12 The first Saturday of the month is always the busiest (with the exception of some of the bank holiday weekends). Around 40% of the total monthly customers use the service on the first Saturday of each month.
- 3.13 Customers may be disadvantaged by not being able to make payments on a Saturday but there is no evidence to suggest that they cannot make other arrangements and assistance would be provided to ensure a smooth transition to alternative payment methods.
- 3.14 Regardless of the number of customers it is necessary to have a minimum of 3 staff to cover the payments and enquiries desks on a Saturday morning. Currently staff who work on Saturdays take the commensurate time off in the week reducing the resources available at busier times, and thus reducing the level of service that can be provide when it is most needed. As the total staff group has reduced over time due to some of the changes mentioned in 3.4 and reduced funding from Worcestershire County Council it has become increasingly difficult to resource to an appropriate level at the times when demand is higher.

Customer / Equalities and Diversity Implications

- 3.15 Closing the face to face service on a Saturday may disadvantage a relatively small number of customers. However it would enable us to make better use of our resources at the times needed by the majority of our customers.
- 3.16 There is no evidence to suggest that any group of customers would be unfairly disadvantaged. Monitoring of the customers using the service suggests no specific group is more likely to use the service on a Saturday. Furthermore, we have a wide range of options available to customers to ensure that they can still do their business with us in a timely fashion, ensuing fair access to services.

3.17 Appropriate out of hours cover is place in the event of any emergencies.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT

4.1 In order to ensure customers have time to make other arrangements an implementation date end the end of August is proposed.

4.2 Appropriate publicity of any change would be put in place giving alternative methods of payments and contact arrangements, and regular customers would be talked through their options for making payments in future.

5. APPENDICES

None

6. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Held by Customer Services

7. KEY

N/A

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