

Equality Assessment Record

Title of Service, Policy, Procedure, Spending Review being Proposed	Closure of Cashiers Service (Town Hall)
Name of Service Area	Customer Services
Name of Officer completing this assessment	Paul Stephenson
Date Assessment Started	16/06/22
Name of Decision Maker (in relation to the change)	Executive
Date Decision Made	

Please ensure the following:

- That the document is understandable to a reader who has not read any other documents, and explains (on its own) how the Public Sector Equality Duty is met. This does not need to be lengthy, but must be complete.
- That available support information and data is identified and where it can be found. Also be clear about highlighting gaps in existing data or evidence that you hold, and how you have sought to address these knowledge gaps.
- That the equality impacts are capable of aggregation with those of other EIAs to identify the cumulative impact of all service changes made by the council on different groups of people.

Overview

Provide a clear overview of the aims of the service/policy/procedure and the proposed changes being made. Will the current service users' needs continue to be met? Why is the change being proposed? What needs or duties is it designed to meet?

The Cashiers Service operates out of the Town Hall from Monday to Friday 9am-5pm. Visitor numbers for "in person" payments at the Town Hall have fallen by 90% due to the pandemic and the introduction of allpay for most services.

Housing (50%), Council Tax (40%) and Sundry Debtors (5%) account for the highest service payments from customers. All these services offer allpay as well as many other methods of payment as an alternative to cashiers' payments, including web, telephone, standing order and Direct Debit.

Cash and card payments at the counter account for fewer than 4% of transactions, compared to allpay (10%), web/telephone (15%) and direct debit (70%). Over a 2-week period in March, only 202 visited cashiers (20 a day).

The council still relies on its cashiering service for in-house transactions despite a range of alternatives being offered. Services such as dial-a-ride have drivers presenting at the Town Hall daily to deposit as little as £50 for the day. Other services include Leisure, and Housing (washing machine monies etc) and bulky waste customers who choose to pay in cash.

Redditch and Bromsgrove Cash Offices are the sole remaining cash offices in the county, and one of the last remaining cash offices in both the midlands, and the country due to cheaper and more viable alternatives becoming available. Several councils made the decision to not re-open their cash offices during the pandemic.

Alternatives to Face to Face Payments

As an alternative to the "face to face" cashiers service, there are numerous alternative payment arrangements for the customer. This links to the Councils updated Customer and Digital Strategy.

- Direct Debit
- Allpay (to pay rent, council tax and sundry debtors' invoices)
- Online card payment through council website
- Automated Telephone Payment (ATP)
- Bank Standing Order / Bank Transfer

- Postal Cheque

There are many PayPoint and Post Office locations across the borough who offer longer opening times, including evenings and weekends, enabling customers to make payments at a location and time more convenient to them. Allpay have also recently introduced Payzone as another payment outlet, adding a further 10 premises for customers to pay, including Tesco Supermarket in Oakenshaw.

Those who wish to continue to pay in cash for their essential bills can do so at the Post Office, Payzone and PayPoint whose locations are shown in Appendix A

Transition Arrangements

It is accepted that there will need to be a comprehensive customer service offensive with officers working with customers to encourage them to switch to alternative payment methods. To an extent this has already been done and our experiences when closing the One Stop Shops at Batchley, Winyates and Woodrow will be informative in this context. It will be necessary for officers to proactively contact tenants during the period of transition to advise and encourage them through the process of change. Furthermore, we can draw on experience and lessons learned as this was done during the Covid pandemic in 2020 when the offices were forced to close

Customer Service Officers can discuss alternative payment methods with each customer to ensure a smooth transition before the closure of the cash office.

The Council intends to open a main reception at the same time that the cash office closes that will deal with general customer enquiries, and any customers who present for payment-related reasons after the closure of cash office can be advised on the alternative options

There will still be free-to-use self-service telephones at the Town Hall for customers who want to pay their bills using the automated telephone payment line, free and unlimited use of the public access PC's to make web payments using their credit or debit card, as well as the free and unlimited use of Wi-Fi for customers to use their own devices (mobile phones/tablets etc)

By working with those customers, and improving their digital skills, we will be able to help customers become more financially independent. In addition, our Financial Independence Teams work with the most vulnerable members of our communities in relation to supporting them in managing their finances. Financial independence goes hand in hand with digital independence. Customers who solely use cash as a payment method will not be getting the best deals and have limited buying power.

Who is the proposal likely to affect?	Yes	No
All residents	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Specific group(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
All Council employees	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Specific group(s) of employees	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Other – Provide more details below	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Details

Outline who could be affected and how they could be affected by the proposal/service change. Include current service users and those who could benefit from but do not currently access the service.

The initial screening has identified that the closure of the Cashiers Service will not adversely disadvantage any of the protected groups because alternative and non-discriminatory options exist for all sections of the community.

Customers will be able to use post office/Paypoint/Payzone in any locations nationally to pay for their services, or alternatively can use one of the alternative payments in the overview. The Town Hall is still open as a location so if the customer attended the town Hall, then they can be advised of the alternatives, which includes payment via free-to-use telephone service as well as public access PC's or shown the location of a local Post Office/Payzone or Paypoint.

Evidence and data used to inform your equality impact assessment

What data, research, or trend analysis have you used? Describe how you have got your information and what it tells you.

- Information on customer numbers attending town hall
- Testimony from Customer Support Officers who are seeing customers daily

Visitor numbers for “in person” payments at the Town Hall have fallen by 90% due to the pandemic and the introduction of all pay for most services.

The Town Hall was closed during Coronavirus lockdown for a 3–4-month period and we did not have any time to consult customers upon the closure, and we did not see any occasions where customers were unable to pay by alternative methods

We also draw upon our experience of the closure of the One Stop Shop outer offices in Mar 2022 where all residents attending the centre in the 3-month period prior to closure had alternative payments offered. There were no complaints received because of this decision.

Engagement and Consultation

What engagement and consultation have you undertaken about the proposal with current service users, potential users and other stakeholders? What is important to them regarding the current service? How does (or could) the service meet their needs? How will they be affected by the proposal? What potential impacts did they identify because of their protected characteristic(s)? Did they identify any potential barriers they may face in accessing services/other opportunities that meet their needs?

There will be a 3-month transition period where all customers presenting at the centre will be spoken to and offered alternative payment methods. This will ensure that all customers will be given a sufficient timeframe to pay, review and analyse their new payment methods and come back into the centre before it closes.

Subsequently, there will be a main reception which will be hosted by the same officers following the closure who can further advise on their alternative payment methods or provide support to pay using a public access PC or telephone.

It is highly unlikely that there would be a situation where customers are faced with a closed door with no means of support, whether that be during the transitional period or afterwards. Should the building be closed due to a national outbreak (e.g. Coronavirus lockdown) then alternatives would be considered as and when it occurs.

Every service the council offers also has an alternative method of payment.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Due regard must be given to the three aims of the Equality Duty. This means that you must consciously think about the three aims as part of the process of decision-making. Consider the current service and any proposed changes, thinking about what issues may arise.

Equality Duty Aims	Evidence
Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation	The closure of the Cashiers Service will not adversely disadvantage any of the protected groups because alternative and non-discriminatory options exist for all sections of the community.

<p>How does the proposal/service ensure that there is no barrier or disproportionate impact for anyone with a particular protected characteristic</p>	
<p>Advance equality of opportunity between different groups How does the proposal/service ensure that its intended outcomes promote equality of opportunity for users? Identify inequalities faced by those with specific protected characteristic(s).</p>	<p>N/A</p>
<p>Foster good relations between different groups Does the service contribute to good relations or to broader community cohesion objectives? How does it achieve this aim?</p>	<p>N/A</p>

Is there evidence of actual or potential unfairness for the following equality groups?

- Does the proposal target or exclude a specific equality group or community?
 - Does it affect some equality groups or communities differently and can this be justified?
 - Is the proposal likely to be equally accessed by all equality groups and communities? If not, can this be justified?
- (It may be useful to consider other groups, not included in the Equality Act, especially if the proposal is specifically for them e.g. lone parents, refugees, unemployed people, carers)

Impact of proposal

Describe the likely impact of the proposal on people because of their protected characteristic and how they may be affected. How likely is it that people with this protected characteristic will be negatively affected? What are the barriers that might make access difficult or stop different groups or communities accessing the proposal? How great will that impact be on their well-being? Could the proposal promote equality and good relations between different groups? How?

If you have identified any area of actual or potential unfairness that cannot be justified, can you eliminate or minimise this?

What mitigating actions can be taken to reduce or remove this impact? (Include these in the action plan at the end of the assessment) Equal treatment does not always produce equal outcomes; sometimes you will have to take specific steps for particular groups to address an existing disadvantage or to meet differing needs.

Protected Group	Impact of proposal	Justification for any actual or potential unfairness identified	If you have identified any area of actual or potential unfairness that cannot be justified, can you eliminate or minimise this?
Age	The closure of the Cashiers Service will not adversely disadvantage any of the protected groups because alternative and non-discriminatory options exist for all sections of the community.		
Disability			
Transgender			
Marriage and Civil Partnership			
Pregnancy and Maternity			
Race			
Religion or Belief			
Sex (Male/ Female)			
Sexual Orientation			

How will you monitor any changes identified?

Feedback from staff and any concerns or complaints from service users will be reviewed weekly during the transition period.

The actions required to address these findings are set out below.

Action Required	By Whom	By When	Completion Date
Review feedback from customers through CSO's	Maria Wright Paul Stephenson	Weekly	01/01/23

Implement a communication plan using social media, press releases and posters at the Town hall during the transition period so customers are fully aware.	Maria Wright Paul Stephenson	As required	01/01/23
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Sign off on completion	Name	Signature	Date
Lead Officer completing assessment	Paul Stephenson		16/06/22
Equalities Officer	Emily Payne		16/06/22

When you have completed this assessment, retain a copy and send an electronic copy to the Policy Team (Equalities) attaching any supporting evidence used to carry out the assessment.