

REPORT TO CABINET

<u>Open/Exempt</u>		Would any decisions proposed :		
Any especially affected Wards	Mandatory/	Be entirely within Cabinet's powers to decide <u>YES/NO</u>		
	Discretionary /	Need to be recommendations to Council		YES/<u>NO</u>
	<u>Operational</u>	Is it a Key Decision		YES/<u>NO</u>
Lead Member: Kathy Mellish E-mail: Cllr.Kathy.Mellish@west-norfolk.gov.uk		Other Cabinet Members consulted: Cllr Brian Long, Full Cabinet		
		Other Members consulted: Corporate Performance Panel		
Lead Officer: Honor Howell E-mail: honor.howell@west-norfolk.gov.uk Direct Dial: 01553 616550		Other Officers consulted: Management Team; Matthew Henry		
Financial Implications YES/<u>NO</u>	Policy/Personnel Implications YES/<u>NO</u>	Statutory Implications YES/<u>NO</u>	Equal Impact Assessment <u>YES/NO</u> If YES: Pre-screening/ <u>Full Assessment</u>	Risk Management Implications YES/<u>NO</u>

Date of meeting: 1st August 2017

BOROUGH COUNCIL OF KING'S LYNN & WEST NORFOLK AREA OFFICES

Summary

The Borough Council has 3 CIC offices in the Borough. The main council offices in King's Court, King's Lynn and two area offices, located in Downham Market and Hunstanton.

Until a few years ago, both the Downham Market and Hunstanton offices offered a full enquiry counter service to the customer, including a Cash office. The Cash Offices closed in 2011 but the offices have remained open to provide a face to face service for people living in and around the surrounding areas. The offices are currently open two days a week. Downham Market on a Monday and Friday and Hunstanton on a Tuesday and Thursday.

With the introduction of digital services, the numbers of customers visiting the area offices has reduced significantly. Traditionally, the main reasons customers visited the area offices were in respect of housing and benefit enquiries. Both of these services have now been fully digitalised, meaning customers are able to make applications to go on the housing register, apply for benefit, report a change of circumstances as well as upload supporting evidence online, negating the need to visit the offices in person. More detailed enquiries can be made over the telephone or by web chat.

Job Centre Plus (JCP) currently sub-let space in the CIC's. However, they have now given notice to their staff that they are closing their offices due to the roll out of

Universal Credit. Freebridge Community Housing ceased their presence in the offices several years ago.

Since 2013, both offices have been a point of sale for the food waste kitchen caddy liners. The council will soon cease the sale of the liners as a change in food waste recycling technology enables customers to now use plastic bags in their food waste bins. This will more than halve the number of customers visiting the offices during their opening times.

Recommendation

The recommendation is that the council close the area offices from a date to be agreed with the JCP to co-ordinate the communications to our customers.

Following a recommendation from the Corporate Performance Panel, consultation will be held with customers using both offices to determine the potential impact on the local community and service users of closing the offices. Initial results from the consultation will be made available at the Cabinet meeting.

Reason for Decision

Closing the area offices would free up four days of staff resource to ease the pressure on the telephone contact centre. Most services are available online and customers can telephone for a service request if they are unable to access online services. The council still offers a Visiting Officer service to visit elderly or vulnerable customers, if they require a personalised service.

1. Background

The Borough Council of King's Lynn & West Norfolk has several locations throughout the borough where staff are based. Services delivered directly to the customer are provided from the main council office in King's Court, King's Lynn and from the satellite offices in Downham Market and Hunstanton.

- 1.1 Until a few years ago, both Downham Market and Hunstanton office offered a full enquiry counter service to the customer, including a cash office. The cash offices were closed in 2011 but the offices have remained open to provide a face to face service for people living in the surrounding areas so they did not have to travel to King's Lynn.
- 1.2 With the introduction of digital services, the numbers of customers visiting the area offices has reduced over time. To reflect this, in April 2016, the number of days the offices opened was reduced to 2 per week (Downham Market on Monday's and Fridays and Hunstanton on Tuesdays and Thursdays). This reduction has made the service less available and customers are now using the digital channels to make enquiries and requests for services. Traditionally the main reason for customers visiting the area offices was for housing and benefit enquiries. Both Housing Services and Benefits are now fully digitalised, meaning customers are able to make applications, report change of circumstances as well as submit supporting evidence online, negating the need to visit the offices in person. More detailed enquiries can be made over the telephone or by web chat.
- 1.3 The area offices have, in the past, been a 'hub' of public sector services. Both Freebridge Community Housing and Job Centre Plus (JCP) have leased

office space in the buildings and provided a face-to-face service to customers. Freebridge ceased their presence several years ago and JCP have advised they will be withdrawing their staff at both offices in September 2017.

- 1.4 The actual buildings the offices occupy have different circumstances around ownership. Downham Market is based in The Priory Centre, owned by Norfolk County Council and a 125 year lease agreement is in place. . The council can sub-let its space but the lease has a restrictive covenant restricting the council to sub-letting space within the office to public sector/voluntary sector organisations only. Property Services have made applications to vary the terms of the lease in the past but to date, this has not been successful.
- 1.5 Hunstanton Office is based in Valentine Road. This is a large building, dated back to Victorian times when it was originally a children’s home. The council own the building and operate a pay and display car park which surrounds the building, providing an income to the authority. The building is currently included in the ‘One Public Estate’ project in Hunstanton and it is possible that other organisations may move into the building in the future, thus rationalising public sector accommodation in the area. Currently, the JCP, Social Services, Community Cars, Pay for Nannies operate from the building, as well as the CIC.
- 1.6 Since 2013, both offices have been a point of sale for the food waste kitchen caddy liners. The council will soon stop selling the liners as a change in food waste recycling technology enables customers to now use plastic bags in their food waste bins.

2.0 Downham Market

- 2.1 Downham Market office occupies an area within the ground floor of the building. There is a large counter, a separate interview room, a secure cash office (now unused) and a small kitchen/break out area. The office used to have 5 full time staff members but over the years has reduced down to just one member of staff, twice a week. The Tourist Information Centre (TIC) is located within the office, but receives very few enquiries. So far in 2017, no enquiries have been received for the TIC.

Customer enquiry numbers to the Downham Market office are as follows:

Downham Market Office		
	2015/2016	2016/2017**
Enquiries	3,821	1,893
Caddy Liner Sales	5,821	1,076
Total	9,642	2,969

** Office opening times reduced to 2 days a week

- 2.2 Including sales of caddy liners, the Downham Market office sees an average of 29 customers per day. Caddy liner sales equate to approximately 57% of the enquiries. When the council ceases to sell the caddy liners, it will leave an average of 18 customers per day (approximately 2.5 customers an hour).

3.0 Hunstanton Office

Hunstanton Office		
	2015/2016	2016/2017**
Enquiries	2,467	1,458
Caddy Liner Sales	4,247	728
Total	6,714	2,186

** Office opening times reduced to 2 days a week

- 3.1 Including sales of caddy liners, the Hunstanton Office sees an average of 21 customers per day. Without the sales of caddy lines, it will leave an average of 14 customers a day (approximately 2 customers an hour).
- 3.2 For both offices, the volume of enquiries is declining. This trend is likely to continue as more digital services are made available and customers are used to using them.
- 3.3 When working at the satellite offices, staff are occupied carrying out administration tasks (responding to emails and web chat) but are limited as to how much they are able to assist due to not knowing when a customer may come into the office.

4.0 Points for Cabinet to Consider

- 4.1 Channel Shift and moving customer enquiries to less expensive ways of contacting the council is a corporate priority. The enquiry counters in King's Court were closed in March 2016, and the CIC now operates a 'assisted digital' service whereby customers visiting the offices are given assistance to complete their enquiry or service request online. Appointments are offered for more complex enquiries. This has resulted in telephone contact increasing (as was expected) but, along with a reduction in resources in the CIC from the corporate efficiency programme, it has left the CIC under increased pressure which is now having a notable impact on the staff.

5.0 Cabinet are requested to consider the following options:

5.1 Retain the area offices and continue to open two days a week

Retaining the area offices will enable the council to continue to provide face to face services to the citizens who live in the surrounding area. However, the reductions in the numbers of customers have resulted in the offices being very quiet and it is not considered a good use of officer time when the CIC in King's Court is so busy dealing with enquiries. The speed of the ICT in the area offices is also quite slow, which makes dealing with web chat or emails quite difficult and time consuming. Numbers of customers will inevitably drop with the withdrawal of the caddy liner sales as well as the closure of JCP during 2017.

5.2 Retain the area offices but reduce the number of days further to just one day a week.

Opening the area office one day a week would still allow customers to access face to face services in those areas. However, it would reduce the time the service was available to a very narrow window.

5.3 Close the area offices and work with Property Services and the One Public Estate project to establish a use for the offices in the future

The recommended option is to close the area offices and direct all enquiries to the main office at King's Court. This would free up four days of staff resource to ease the pressure on the telephone contact centre. Most services are available online and customers can telephone for a service request if they are unable to access online services. The council still offers a Visiting Officer service to visit elderly or vulnerable customers, if they require a personalised service.

5.4 Following a recommendation from the Corporate Performance Panel, consultation has been held with customers using both offices to determine the potential impact on the local community and service users of closing the offices. The results from the initial consultation are attached to this report for Cabinet to consider. The results show:

- Nearly 50% of customers visiting Hunstanton office are buying caddy liners
- 50% of customers use the office less than once a month
- If the Hunstanton office were to close, 80% would use the telephone instead
- 39% of customers visiting Downham Market were purchasing caddy liners
- 61% use the Downham Market office less than once a month
- 20% of customers using Downham Market declared a disability

For both offices, 80% of customers would use the telephone if they were not able to visit the office. Should the decision to close the offices be made a strong communications plan would be put into place, ensuring customers were aware of the different ways they can contact the council. The Visiting Officer service would also be heavily promoted.

6.0 Policy Implications

6.1 There are no policy implications.

7.0 Financial Implications

7.1 There are no financial implications for the CIC and no costs arising to the council. The offices are resourced using existing staff and staffing levels cannot be reduced any further without compromising the ability to offer a CIC service. A small amount of travelling expenses will be saved as the council currently pays mileage to staff travelling to the area offices.

7.2 The closure of the area CIC offices is being recommended from an operational perspective. The long term future use for both buildings does not form part of this report. Decisions in this area will be informed by the One Public Estate project and Property Services in respect of the Hunstanton office.

8.0 Personnel Implications

8.1 Retaining the area offices will increase the pressure on the CIC in King's Court. The relatively small number of enquiries does not warrant the resource allocated to the offices.

9.0 Statutory Considerations

9.1 There are no statutory implications.

10.0 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

10.1 Consultation with local users of the offices has been carried out on the potential closure of the offices and initial results from this consultation are attached to this report. A full impact assessment has been carried out and is attached to the report.

11.0 Risk Management Implications

11.1 The CIC has effectively reduced by 5 FTE since Christmas 2016. This is due to resignations, maternity leave and staff transferring to other departments. This has impacted on the staff significantly as we are also introducing new services. Closing the area offices will give more resource to the King's Court CIC, which in turn will enable the CIC to maintain a service from this location.

12.0 Declarations of Interest / Dispensations Granted

12.1 There are none

13.0 Background Papers

13.1 Report to CPP 17th July 2017