

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET ON 3 NOVEMBER 2015 FROM RESOURCES AND PERFORMANCE PANEL HELD ON 27 OCTOBER 2015

RP70 **Cabinet Report: Customer Services and Channel Shift**

The Customer Information Manager reminded the Panel that a presentation had been given at the previous meeting on the Channel Shift Programme.

In presenting the report, the Customer Information Manager explained that the Council had embarked on a channel shift programme which aimed to reduce the cost of delivery of council services by shifting the channel used by customers to contact the Council to the most efficient and appropriate for that service.

The Panel's attention was drawn to the following proposals set out in the report:

- Agree the withdrawal of a drop in service for enquiries at King's Court and to offer pre-booked appointments to customers who were unable to resolve their enquiry by telephone or online.
- Agree to reduce the opening days at the Downham Market Office to 2 days per week (Monday and Friday).
- Agree to reduce the opening days at the Hunstanton Office to 2 days per week (Tuesday and Thursday).

The Customer Information Centre Manager explained that more digital services would be launched over the new few months.

The development and implementation of digital services, together with the need to make budget savings had resulted in a review of our existing model of service delivery with a view to managing demand for services.

Members were informed that the Customer Information Centre offices at King's Court, Downham Market and Hunstanton operated a walk in enquiry desk facility, 7 members of staff were needed on the ground floor of King's Court and one at each area office to respond to customer enquiries. Staff were required to be trained in every service offered so that they could respond to any enquiry which was presented. It was highlighted that this was challenging for the Customer Information Centre to manage rotas, annual leave and sickness and often resulted in staff being moved between the contact Centre and the Enquiry Counters during the day.

The Panel was informed that although the number of visitors to the Council's main reception had increased, this was due to the sale of food waste bags, introduced in 2013. Overall, general enquiries had reduced, although personal visits in relation to Planning and Licensing had increased.

The Customer Information Manager explained that over the next few months, more improvements would be made to the Council's services, as set out below:

- A new, fully responsive design council website would be launched.
- Online benefit change in circumstance form.
- Online Revenue forms (change of address, set up direct debit, apply for a single occupier discount, apply for an exemption and report a change in circumstances).
- Launch of an online customer account enabling customers to view, submit and track service requests as well as viewing personalised account information.
- Applications to join the Housing Register would be available online.
- The launch of an internal programme of service transformation encouraging all staff and managers to review their processes to assess what could be made available online to customers, where this was the most appropriate channel.

Members were informed that in order to continue to meet the Council's customer needs, but to realise savings and greater efficiencies from its digital services, it was proposed to cease the drop in service for enquiries at King's Court and to offer customers who were unable to resolve their enquiry by telephone or online an appointment with a trained advisor who would be able to assist them with their enquiry at a pre-arranged time.

It was noted that introducing pre-booked appointments for customers would be a major change for the Borough Council, but it was standard practice in most sectors. The Department of Work and Pensions, GP's, opticians, banks, hairdressers and most other services all operate appointment to manage the customer demand on services and to avoid customer waiting long periods of time to be seen.

The Customer Information Centre Manager explained that an appointment system was intended to improve the service to customers. It was highlighted that currently, a customer would wait in excess of 1.5 hours to see an advisor at busy times. This was because it was impossible to predict the number and nature of enquiries the Borough Council received. Some enquiries were straightforward and would take just a few minutes. Others were complex, often with elderly or vulnerable people which required time to resolve. By providing the customers with an appointment at a time convenient to them, they could be assured that they would be seen at their allotted appointment time and would not have to waste time waiting to be seen.

The Customer Information Centre Manager informed Members that the main reception at King's Court would continue to have two members of staff at all times, together with at least One Online Support Officer. Housing Options would have a Duty Officer available to deal with

customer enquiries. The Planning Department would have a Duty Planner available to respond to customer enquiries every weekday until 1 pm.

The Panel was advised that an Equalities Impact Assessment had been produced and the Corporate Equalities Group had not identified any major issues. A communications plan would be drafted to advise customers of the proposed changes.

In conclusion, the Customer Information Centre Manager explained that the It was proposed to start the new arrangements from 1 April 2016, allowing time for a comprehensive communications plan to be put in place to advise customers, partners and stakeholders of the changes. The Customer Information Manager advised that as the channel shift and other transformation projects progressed, it was anticipated that budget savings would be made.

In response to questions from Councillor Devereux regarding consultation arrangements, the Customer Information Centre Manager explained that if customers were asked about the proposed changes the majority would answer that they preferred to see the service remain as it was currently. Members were provided with an example of when the Council decided to close the three cash offices in 2011 which provided a saving of £100,000. The Communications Plan had set out the reasons for the closure and no major problems had been experienced. With the continuing pressure on the Council's budgets, the Council had to look at ways of delivering its services more cost effectively. The Chairman, Councillor Humphrey advised that the proposed changes would be implemented in April 2016.

In response to questions from Councillor Wareham on booking appointments, the Customer Information Centre Manager explained that customers could book appointments by telephone, online or face to face. However, if a customer visited the Council offices requiring immediate urgent assistance then an officer would be available to deal with the situation. With the pre-booked appointments service the customer would be seen at the booked time and not have to wait up to 1.5 hours in the Customer Information Centre waiting to see an adviser.

Councillor Middleton asked if the Council had considered inter-active work stations to enable customers to access the Council's services. In response, the Customer Information Manager advised that all Customer Information Centres had self service stations – 5 in King's Court, and 1 in both Hunstanton and Downham Market offices. In Downham Market, there was an internet connection in the library. The Panel was advised that the Council was looking at a kiosk based approach.

In response to questions from Councillor Collop, the Customer Information Manager explained that there would be a duty officers located at King's Court to deal with licencing, planning and homelessness enquiries. However, within the satellite offices there would be no duty officers, but visiting officers were available to carry out home visits for those customers not able to visit the offices or access the Council's services online. When

the Hunstanton and Downham Market offices were closed the customer could telephone the Borough Council when trained advisers would be able to assist and direct the customer to the service required. Emergencies could also be dealt with via the Council's out of hours service.

The Customer Information Manager explained that there would be staff available to assist customers to self serve services as well as helping, for example, to complete benefit forms.

Councillor Devereux expressed concern on the potential impact on elected members and highlighted the importance of Members being equipped with a communications pack to provide an understanding of which communication channels to utilise. The Chairman, Councillor Humphrey advised that all Members would receive the necessary information and training.

The Chairman, Councillor Humphrey asked if the Council had to sell caddy liners now that they were readily available in supermarkets. In response, the Customer Information advised that the Council had chosen to sell caddy liners when the food waste collection was introduced. The Customer Information Centre provided an overview of the recent work recently undertaken relating to the recycling credits.

In response to further questions from Councillor Collop regarding caddy liners and the Council increasing the price, the Customer Information Manager advised that this was subject to a further report.

Councillor Collop wished it to be recorded that he did not support the recommendations set out below.

RESOLVED: The Panel supported the recommendations as set out in the Cabinet report, together with the following additional recommendation:

Members wished to receive assurance that adequate consultation and communications arrangements would be put in place prior to implementation in April 2016.