

## POLICY REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT PANEL REPORT

REPORT TO:	Corporate Performance Panel		
DATE:	17 <sup>th</sup> July 2017		
TITLE:	Borough Council of King's Lynn & West Norfolk Area Offices		
TYPE OF REPORT:	Review		
PORTFOLIO(S):	Cllr Kathy Mellish - Offices		
REPORT AUTHOR:	Honor Howell – Assistant Director		
<b>OPEN/EXEMPT</b>	Open	WILL BE SUBJECT TO A FUTURE CABINET REPORT:	<b>Yes/No</b>

### **REPORT SUMMARY/COVER PAGE**

#### **PURPOSE OF REPORT/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 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.

The purpose of this report is to review the level of use of the Downham Market and Hunstanton offices by customers and agree an option for the long term viability of the offices.

#### **KEY ISSUES:**

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 half the number of customers visiting the offices during their opening times.

#### **OPTIONS CONSIDERED:**

##### **Retain the area offices as they are 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.

**Retain the area offices but reduce the opening days to just one day per week at both offices**

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 and would still lead to under-utilised staff resource.

**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**

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.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

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.

**REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:**

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.

## **REPORT DETAIL**

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 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.
- 1.2 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.
- 1.3 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 Tuesday 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 reasons customers visited the area offices' was in respect of housing and benefit enquiries. Both these services have now been fully digitalised, meaning customers are able to make applications, report a 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.
- 1.4 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 and closing both of their offices in October 2017.
- 1.5 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.
- 1.6 Hunstanton Office is based in Valentine Road, Hunstanton. This is a large building, dated back to Victorian times when it was originally a children's home. The council owns 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 DWP, Social Services, Community Cars and Pay for Nannies operate from the building, as well as the CIC.
- 1.7 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.

## 1.8 Downham Market Office

The 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 been reduced to just one member of staff, twice a week. The Tourist Information Centre (TIC) is located within the office but receives very few enquiries.

1.9 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	9,653	2,969

\*\* Office opening times reduced to 2 days a week

Including sales of caddy liners, the Downham Market office sees an average of 28 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 12 customers per day (approximately 1.7 customers an hour).

## 1.10 Hunstanton Office

Customer enquiry numbers to the Hunstanton office are as follows:

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

Including sales of caddy liners, the Hunstanton Office sees an average of 21 customers per day. Without the sales of caddy liners, it will leave an average of 14 customers a day (approximately 2 customers an hour).

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.

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. The speed of the ICT available also impacts on the staff's ability to operate the web chat facility.

## **2. Options for the Panel to Consider**

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 The panel are requested to consider the following options:

### **Retain the area offices as they are 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.

- 2.3 **Retain the area offices but reduce the opening days to just one day per week at both offices**

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 and

2. **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.

**The panel members are requested to discuss and agree a preferred option for the Downham Market and Hunstanton offices.**

## **3. Corporate Priorities**

- 3.1 The proposal links to the Corporate Business Plan Priority One: Provide important local services within our available resources.

## **4. Financial Implications**

- 4.1 There are no financial implications for the CIC. The offices are resourced using existing staff and staffing levels cannot be reduced at the present time. A small amount of travelling expenses will be saved as the council currently pays mileage to staff travelling to the area offices.

**5. Any other Implications/Risks**

5.1 There are no risk implications.

**6. Equal Opportunity Considerations**

6.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment (Pre Screening) will be completed following the selection of the one of the options outlined in this report.

**7. Consultation**

Management Team, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder

**8. Conclusion**

8.1 As detailed in the Corporate Business Plan, it is a key priority of the council to provide important local services within our available resources. The low volume of customers visiting the area offices is indicative that valuable resource is not being used as effectively as it could be and the resource would be utilised in King's Court, assisting with telephone enquiries.

**9. Background Papers**

None