

REPORT TO: CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Subject: Review of transfer of customer access to libraries
Report of: Guy Kilminster, Head of Health and Wellbeing
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Date: 25th February 2011

1. Background

Cabinet approved a proposal in February 2010 to transfer the former District Council Customer Service Points to libraries to provide a single Council access point in those communities. The formation of the unitary authority created this opportunity to make better use of both staffing and property resources, and also provide customers with more flexible opening hours into the evening and weekends. This transfer was completed in six locations from April to September (Alsager, Congleton, Holmes Chapel, Middlewich, Knutsford and Wilmslow). This was envisaged to be the first phase of extending customer access to customers through libraries. The second phase is now being considered in a review of the Council's Customer Services Strategy, taking into account the lessons learned from the first phase.

2. Review of phase 1

Customers can expect to receive information and signposting on all Council services from a library. This is not a new role for libraries and is a responsibility they have fulfilled for the County Council for many years. In most situations this will involve:

- answering the enquiry directly
- directing customers to a resource on the internet;
- or providing them with a telephone number of somebody that can help them;
- or providing them with a form to complete;

Following the transfer of the former Customer Service Points, the main additional demand from customers visiting libraries was in:

- taking Council tax payments in former Congleton Borough Council locations
- issuing concessionary travel passes
- providing advice and support for benefits applications, and receiving and verifying evidence relating to a benefits claim

This additional demand created several challenges for the libraries.

The libraries located in the former Borough of Congleton received very high volumes of customers wishing to pay their Council tax in person. This created an unprecedented demand on library staff and resulted in customer queues forming at peak times. This was also an inconsistent provision of service across the borough with Macclesfield customers, for example, already directed to the post office or Paypoint for face to face payments. To help reduce these peaks of demand on libraries, from 15 March 2011 payments by cash, cheque, debit or credit card will no

longer be accepted at Libraries for payment of Council Tax and Business Rates. Posters and leaflets have been distributed to advise customers of this. We are actively encouraging payment by direct debit, online or at Paypoint and Post Office as an alternative. This supports the Council's strategy to provide value for money services across a choice of access channels and will bring us in line with similar organisations such as utility companies enabling customers to pay all their bills in one place.

In general, the larger libraries have coped with the additional customer demand with their existing resources except during the peak periods described above. Middlewich, a Band C library, has struggled, however, due to the fact that there are typically only two members of staff in the library at any time. A business case is being prepared to request additional resources at Middlewich and other Band C libraries that we extend customer access to in a second phase.

There have been a small number of complaints relating to the lack of privacy in libraries, particularly when customers wish to discuss a sensitive issue such as a benefits claim. This was a source of complaint in the former Customer Service Points also, as there was not a private meeting facility in all locations. The complaints have highlighted that customers do not necessarily expect a private meeting room, but they are frustrated at having sensitive conversations at a counter with a queue forming behind them. Library staff are sensitive to this issue and will take customers to a more appropriate section of the library for a discreet discussion if appropriate. This issue has been considered in the new library design that is being introduced with the roll out of self service, with the removal of the traditional counter and the encouragement of customer self service to reduce queues. Customers will be able to talk to staff at pods or desks that are distributed throughout the library.

Library staff have been trained to receive and verify evidence in relation to a benefits claim, but this has proven a lengthy process with the member of staff required to photocopy each piece of evidence. The documents are then forwarded to the Benefits team via the courier service. The courier may only collect from the library twice a week, however, and this has resulted in delays in benefits being paid out. Scanners are now being introduced into the libraries to speed up the process of copying the evidence and to provide the benefits team with the evidence by electronic transfer in almost real-time. Some of the most lengthy and time consuming enquiries from customers in libraries can relate to new benefit claims. We are exploring options to help customers connect to a specialist via video conferencing technology such as TellyTalk for more in-depth enquiries. This technology has proven very successful in libraries in Lancashire and has extended the services that can be accessed from libraries, such as applications for blue badges. We are also considering the option for some services to make an appointment for the customer to meet a specialist at another time in the library.

3. Future strategy

The Council's Customer Services Strategy is currently being reviewed, and face to face access is a key component of this strategy. One of the draft strategic objectives is to ***provide straightforward, high quality, value for money service through a choice of access channels.***

This reaffirms the Council's commitment to provide a facility for those customers that prefer face to face access. The draft strategy also states the following principles in relation to face to face access:

- Our Customer Service Centres in Crewe and Macclesfield will provide customers with a one stop shop service, including access to specialist staff on an appointment basis (appointments will not be required in emergency situations such as safeguarding incidents)
- Libraries or other community hubs where appropriate will provide an Information Point service in other locations. The role of these Information Points will be to provide information, signpost and help customers to self serve. Handoffs for more in-depth enquiries will be facilitated through the use of video conferencing technology such as TellyTalk.

These principles apply to the provision of general customer access to Council services. Solutions to meet a specific service need such as Children's Centres or Benefits surgeries and home visits will be considered within the plans of those services.

Work is ongoing to describe the role that libraries will play as this community hub, learning from the lessons of the initial transfer of Customer Service Points to the libraries, and then to develop a business case to extend customer access through other libraries in Cheshire East.

While still work in progress, it is envisaged that a customer will be able to expect the following from their library as the community hub:

Customers can expect to receive information and signposting on all Council services. In most situations this will involve:

- answering the enquiry directly
- directing customers to a resource on the internet;
- or providing them with a telephone number of somebody that can help them;
- or providing them with a form to complete;
- or helping them connect to a specialist via video conferencing technology such as TellyTalk for more in-depth enquiries;
- or for some services this may involve making an appointment for them to meet a specialist at another time in the library.

There will be a defined list of services where the library staff will complete the transaction with the customer such as the verification of Benefits forms and evidence or the issuing of concessionary travel passes. Library staff will not take payments for Council tax - customers will be directed to direct debit, online, PayPoint and Post Offices.

When a customer walks into a library they will not see a separate customer service desk, but will be able to approach any member of library staff to assist them. There will not be a confidential meeting room available in every library, but the layout of the library will facilitate discreet discussions if required.

Customers will be able to expect this service in any library across Cheshire East. In Crewe and Macclesfield, customers will be directed to the nearby Customer Service Centres rather than arranging appointments in the library or connecting them via TellyTalk.

The opening hours of the library will not change because they become a community hub, but are currently under review to try and achieve increased opening hours within current resources.