

REPORT TO: CABINET

Date of Meeting: 16 February 2010
Report of: Paul Bayley, Customer Services Manager
Subject/Title: Increasing Customer Access through Libraries
Portfolio Holder: Cllr David Brown, Cllr Andrew Knowles

1.0 Report Summary

- 1.1 The formation of our unitary authority has created the opportunity to increase customer access to a wide range of Council services through libraries.
- 1.2 It will optimise the use of Council resources while also providing improved customer access through longer and more flexible opening hours, at a range of times to suit all residents.
- 1.3 It will reinforce the role of the libraries as the local community hub to access a range of Cheshire East services, and will help encourage customer adoption of web self service through the People's network.
- 1.4 It will also deliver financial benefits that will contribute to the Policy & Performance savings targets for 2010/11 and 2011/12.

2.0 Decision Requested

- 2.1 Cabinet endorse the policy proposal to increase customer access through libraries across Cheshire East with the relocation of Customer Service Points at Alsager, Congleton, Holmes Chapel, Knutsford, Middlewich, Poynton and Wilmslow.

3.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 The Customer Access Strategy for Cheshire East aims to bring Council services closer to the customer. Specific objectives within this strategy include improving the accessibility of Council services in terms of locations, opening hours and access channels, and reducing the cost per contact across all customer access channels.
- 3.2 To support these objectives, Cheshire East is proposing to increase the range of Council services that can be accessed through the libraries during 2010.
- 3.3 In phase 1, the tier 2 customer access that is currently provided through the Customer Service Points (CSPs) at Alsager, Congleton, Holmes Chapel, Knutsford, Middlewich, Poynton and Wilmslow will be transferred to the local libraries. In nearly all cases, the proposal mean that opening hours will be significantly increased, and that access will be available during the evenings

for the first time. It will also support the improved utilisation of Council building assets. Details of the opening hours and average weekly customer volumes of these locations are provided in the appendix.

- 3.4 Also to improve accessibility, new Customer Service Kiosks will be piloted in a selection of libraries to provide direct face to face access via video conferencing to specialist back office resources to help resolve more complex enquiries. If the pilot proves successful, this technology will be extended across all libraries.
- 3.5 In phase 2, this same level of customer access will be extended across all remaining libraries in Cheshire East.

4.0 Wards Affected

- 4.1 All wards.

5.0 Local Ward Members

- 5.1 Not applicable.

6.0 Policy Implications including - Climate change - Health

- 6.1 Transferring tier 2 customer access into the libraries will reduce the Council's accommodation footprint and the associated energy usage.

7.0 Financial Implications for Transition Costs (Authorised by the Borough Treasurer)

- 7.1 None

8.0 Financial Implications 2009/10 and beyond (Authorised by the Borough Treasurer)

- 8.1 The projected annual revenue budget saving from relocating the tier 2 Customer Service Points is £350k. There will be additional asset savings from relocating the CSPs that are located within non-Cheshire East assets but these have not been quantified at this stage. There will be no immediate financial benefit where the CSPs are located within Cheshire East assets but they may be re-used for other purposes.
- 8.2 It is proposed that £100k of the 2010/11 saving is reinvested to the libraries budget to help fund the transition.
- 8.3 The 2010/11 benefit will contribute to the Policy & Performance savings target of £251k for 2010/11, with the deferred £100k contributing to the additional £251k savings target for 2011/12. Work will continue to identify further savings opportunities within Policy & Performance which may enable this initiative to deliver bottom line betterment to the Council.

8.4 The approval of the 2010/11 Capital bid to extend the RFID and Self Service technology into additional libraries to release staff capacity to handle the additional customer service enquiries is critical to ensure a smooth transition.

8.5 A re-evaluation of the library job descriptions reflecting the proposed changes is required, and there is a risk that this may have a small revenue budget implication if there are any changes in grade.

9.0 Legal Implications (Authorised by the Borough Solicitor)

9.1 If redeployment or voluntary redundancy of any displaced staff is not possible, there is a risk that compulsory redundancy may be necessary.

10.0 Risk Management

10.1 There is a risk that key stakeholders within the community will not support this proposal which could generate adverse publicity for the Council. A briefing paper was distributed to Town and Parish Councils and Ward Members for the locations affected by the initial transfer of services. Stakeholders were also invited to a consultation meeting on 4th February to discuss any outstanding concerns with the proposal. This meeting highlighted a number of concerns that will be addressed during the implementation, including:

- Reassurance there would be no degradation in the level of access and service provided in the libraries compared to the CSPs
- The effective transfer of the local knowledge and experience of the existing CSP staff to the library staff
- Sufficient resourcing within the libraries to cope with the increased customer demand
- Fit for purpose buildings, including facilities such as private interview rooms

10.2 The consultation also highlighted frustration with the inconsistent library opening hours and in particular Wednesday and lunchtime closing. A separate proposal will be developed to consider the budget impact of any changes to library opening hours.

10.3 Meetings have also been held with Town and Parish Councils to address specific operational issues, such as access to buildings that are currently shared, e.g. Alsager.

10.4 There is a risk of confusion amongst customers, in particular attempting to access Council services in the former customer service locations. A customer communication plan will be developed to mitigate this risk and ensure customers are fully informed of any changes to local access.

11.0 Background and Options

11.1 In tier 2 customer access locations, Customer Advisors are expected to have a general knowledge of Council services in order to answer requests for

information and services. The majority of customers are seeking concessionary travel passes for bus or rail. Payments for a limited number of Council services can be taken. Advisors can assist customers to complete benefit claim forms and verify documents before being passed on to the back office for processing. Advisors may assist customers to access 'Planning Online' but will be unable to discuss individual applications.

- 11.2 The tier 1 Customer Service Centres located in Crewe Delamere House, Macclesfield Town Hall, Nantwich Civic Centre and Sandbach (Westfields) that provide one stop shop services will remain at their existing locations.
- 11.3 In tier 1 customer access locations, customer enquiries are resolved at first point of contact wherever possible, with a target of 80% resolution, with staff trained to deliver a wide range of council services. For example, Customer Service Advisors are trained to deal with in-depth benefit enquiries which include assistance to fill in claim forms, trial calculations, document verification, entitlements, and referrals in interviews that can take up to one hour. The Advisors are also trained to answer queries regarding planning applications such as objections, submission dates, appeals. There are private interview facilities at tier 1 locations, and customers are able to book appointments to meet with back office specialists.
- 11.4 Whilst unaffected by this policy proposal, Crewe Delamere House Customer Service Centre will be relocated to the Municipal Buildings for four months from January to April 2010 to enable refurbishment of the existing centre.
- 11.5 This policy proposal has been developed as part of the Customer Contact Strategy for Cheshire East. An alternative proposal would be to roll out additional Customer Service Points across the Borough. While increasing accessibility, this option would not reduce the cost per contact due to the additional building and resource costs.
- 11.6 The Council could choose not to extend face to face customer access, but this would reduce accessibility to Council services and be opposed to the agreed Customer Access Strategy.

12.0 Overview of Year One and Term One Issues

- 12.1 There are additional issues with respect to Poynton CSP due to the lease and shared delivery arrangements that were developed with Macclesfield DC that will require further consultation.
- 12.2 The main implementation challenges will be the training of library staff in former District services and the alignment of IT systems.
- 12.3 Displaced staff as a result of the relocation of the Customer Service Points at Alsager, Congleton, Holmes Chapel, Knutsford, Middlewich, Poynton and Wilmslow will be redeployed or offered voluntary redundancy.

- 12.4 The introduction of RFID and Self Service Technology in the libraries will be a critical enabler to the success of this proposal. It enables library users to issue and return books themselves, and so will create staff capacity to manage the customer service enquiries. Five libraries are scheduled to have this technology in place by April 2010 – Macclesfield, Nantwich, Sandbach, Bollington and Holmes Chapel. A capital bid has been submitted for 2010/11 to extend this technology to a further ten libraries.

13.0 Access to Information

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer:

- Customer Access Vision 2009 – 2013
- Cheshire East Contact Strategy

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Appendix – Details of tier 2 Customer Access Locations and Local Libraries

Customer Service Point	Average weekly customer volumes	CSP Opening hours	Library Opening Hours
Alsager	275	Mon to Fri 09.00-13.00	Mon 09.00-17.00 Tue 09.00-19.00 Wed closed Thu 09.00-17.00 Fri 09.00-19.00 Sat 09.30-13.00
Congleton	338	Mon to Fri 09.00-17.00	Mon 09.30-20.00 Tue 09.30-17.30 Wed closed Thu 09.30-20.00 Fri 09.30-17.30 Sat 09.00-16.00
Holmes Chapel	27	Mon 14.00-17.30 Tue 09.30-13.00 Wed closed Thu 09.30-13.30 Fri 09.30-13.00	Mon 14.00-19.00 Tue 09.30-13.00, 14.00-17.00 Wed closed Thu 09.30-13.00, 14.00-19.00 Fri 09.30-13.00, 14.00-17.00 Sat 09.30-13.00
Knustford	180	Mon to Thu 08.45-17.00 Fri 08.45-16.30 Sat 09.00-13.00	Mon 09.00-17.00 Tue 09.00-19.00 Wed 09.00-13.00 Thu 09.00-19.00 Fri 09.00-17.00 Sat 09.30-13.00
Middlewich	146	Mon to Fri 09.00-13.00	Mon 14.00-19.30 Tue 09.30-13.00, 14.00-17.00 Wed closed Thu 09.30-13.00, 14.00-19.30 Fri 09.30-13.00, 14.00-17.00 Sat 09.30-13.00
Poynton	184	Mon to Thu 09.00-17.00 Fri 09.00-16.30 Sat 09.00-13.00	Mon 09.30-17.00 Tue 09.30-20.00 Wed closed Thu 09.30-17.00 Fri 09.30-20.00 Sat 09.30-13.00
Wilmslow	296	Mon to Thu 08.45-17.00 Fri 08.45-16.30 Sat 09.00-13.00	Mon 09.30-20.00 Tue 09.30-17.30 Wed 09.30-13.00 Thu 09.30-20.00 Fri 09.30-17.30 Sat 09.30-13.00