



EAST STAFFORDSHIRE BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT COVER SHEET

Title of Report:	Review of Customer Access (Customer Service Centres)	To be marked with an 'X' by Democratic Services after report has been presented
Meeting of:	Corporate Management Team 15 February 2022	X
	Leader and Deputy Leaders 21 February 2022	X
	Leader's / Leader of the Opposition's Advisory Group / Independent Alliance Advisory Group 3 March 2022	
	Cabinet 14 March 2022	
	Scrutiny Audit and Value for Money Council Services Committee [DATE] / Scrutiny Community Regeneration, Environment and Health and Well Being Committee [DATE]	



Is this an Executive Decision:	YES	Is this a Key Decision:	NO
Is this in the Forward Plan:	YES	Is the Report Confidential: If so, please state relevant paragraph from Schedule 12A LGA 1972:	NO []

Essential Signatories:

ALL REPORTS MUST BE IN THE NAME OF A HEAD OF SERVICE

Interim Monitoring Officer: **Chris Ebberley**

Date 11.02.2022 Signature Chris Ebberley.

Chief Finance Officer: **Sal Khan**

Date 10.02.2022 Signature Sal Khan

EAST STAFFORDSHIRE BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to: Cabinet

Date: 14 March 2022

REPORT TITLE: Review of Customer Access (Customer Service Centres)

PORTFOLIO: Environment and Housing

HEAD OF SERVICE: Sal Khan

CONTACT OFFICER: Catherine Grimley **Ext. No. x1067**

WARD(S) AFFECTED: Multiple

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to endorse a proposal to cease the operation of generic face to face services at the Customer Service Centres in Burton upon Trent and Uttoxeter, moving to remote service delivery with pathways for vulnerable and marginalised groups where required.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The face of Burton and Uttoxeter Customer Service Centres (CSCs) has evolved dramatically since their opening in 2007. Prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020, the CSCs primary use was for Revenues and Benefits enquiries and the home of the Council's Housing Options service. With the introduction of Universal Credit, customers choosing to access services differently and digital services ever evolving, visitor numbers were steadily declining.
- 2.2 Throughout the last 22 months, like in most other sectors, customers were forced to access Council services by alternative means than face to face. The quality of service was maintained throughout this period, with new processes creating capacity to handle complex queries more effectively.
- 2.3 During various periods of covid related government restrictions the requirement for face to face services at the Centre remained very low with

customers choosing to continue with that behaviour change and move away from in-person visits. The requirement for the Customer Service Centres to remain open moving forward therefore is no longer there.

3. Background

- 3.1. The Customer Service Centres in Burton and Uttoxeter opened in 2007 and were seen as a 'one stop shop' for all Council Services. Since that time the Centres evolved into primarily handling Revenues and Benefits enquiries for customers of East Staffordshire with over 85% of enquiries being of this nature.
- 3.2. Since 2011 the Housing Options service has been delivered from the Customer Service Centre.
- 3.3. Peak face to face visitor numbers were achieved in 2013 with 49006 combined visits to Burton and Uttoxeter. Since that time visitor numbers have been steadily declining year on year to 34,895 combined visits in 2019/20 equating to a reduction of almost 30%.
- 3.4. In March 2020, the Customer Service Centres closed due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. All staff moved to remote working at this point and customer enquiries were successfully dealt with over telephone and email instead.
- 3.5. The Customer Service Centre in Burton re-opened on an appointment only basis on 12th October 2020 until its closure again on 5th November 2020 due to the national lockdown and work from home guidance being issued.
- 3.6. Burton Customer Service Centre re-opened on 27th September 2021 and Uttoxeter opened on 11th October. Both Centres closed again in line with government guidance on 10th December 2021 and continue to remain closed.

4. Contribution to Corporate Priorities

- 4.1 Value for Money

5. Accessing Council Services

- 5.1 Since the closure of both Customer Service Centres in March 2020, customers have been accessing Council Services through different channels, namely telephone and email/web forms. This has meant that customers have been able to access information 24 hours a day, 7 days a week online at a time to suit them. ESBC website hits increased by 347,536 from 2020-2021 to 2,484,238, further highlighting the desire for information to be provided digitally.
- 5.2 The key to the effectiveness of this channel shift away from face to face environments was to ensure consistent levels of service for customers across all access channels whether that be telephone or email, and still allowing customers to exercise choice when choosing how their enquiry would be dealt with. The pandemic accelerated this change, and led to the re-evaluation of

current processes and ultimately redesigning the way services are delivered including to vulnerable groups

- 5.3 Prior to the pandemic, the Customer Service Centre's dealt with a large amount of different enquiries, however, the most popular reasons for visiting were 'low value' visits where the transaction between customer and Council could have taken place in an alternative, cheaper and potentially more efficient way for the customer.
- 5.4 A large volume of visits were simply to make a payment of council tax. Payments at the CSC have always been cashless, and the introduction of the self-service payment kiosk at the Burton CSC in 2019 made the transaction digital in any event. With the CSC being closed, customers were nudged to pay their council tax in different ways, either by setting up a direct debit, via online/telephone payments or through [payzone](#) devices. The self-service payment kiosk could also be relocated to another Council owned building if required.
- 5.5 This behaviour change in relation to payment of Council Tax is one example of transactional low value visits that previously would have unnecessarily drawn on officer capacity which could be better utilised elsewhere. The periods of time where the CSCs were closed was accompanied by promotion of the ease of alternative methods of accessing services, making it easier for customers to make informed decisions regarding their method of contact that they potentially weren't aware of, or hadn't engaged with, before.

Another example of this was where original documents were being handed over at the CSC in order to support benefit claims. RBCC officers would scan these onto the system and pass back to the customer. A repetitive process that could take several minutes per customer. Officers have been showcasing how easy it is for these documents to be sent via screenshots on phones/tablets and emailed directly into the department. The vast majority of evidence is now provided this way on a daily basis. The posting of original documents is always discouraged, however, if customers prefer to use the post for providing evidence, then this is also processed by an officer daily.

- 5.6 Neighbouring Local Authorities such as Tamworth Borough Council and Stoke-on-Trent City Council are also reviewing their face-to-face customer services. Tamworth's main Reception at Marmion House remains closed following the pandemic, and Stoke-on-Trent City Council is looking to reduce the opening hours of their only three remaining Local Centres to two days a week. This follows the closure of eight Local Centres already in recent years with demand for face-to-face contact at the Centres falling before the pandemic and people making greater use of online services.

6. E-Services and supporting ESBC's Digital Strategy

- 6.1 The Council's Digital Strategy 2020-2023 (background paper.1) provides an opportunity to improve our customer services, create efficiencies within the

Council, support wider digital enablement in the community and meet our corporate priorities.

6.2 An example of customers now choosing to access services digitally is through the Revenues and Benefits E-Services portal. By providing high quality digital customer services like this, it demonstrates consumer confidence in making digital channels the preferred method of interaction with the Council moving forward, further supporting it's aspirations to develop its digital journey over the coming years.

6.3 Table 1: Number of subscribers to the Revenues and Benefits E-services portal

Date	Application				Total subscriptions
	Business Rates	Council Tax	Housing Benefits	Landlord portal	
01 March 2020	339	1506	219	203	2267
01 February 2022	414	4116	307	221	5058

6.4 The above table shows a 55% increase in subscriptions against pre-pandemic figures.

7. **Management of RBCC Resources**

7.1 Across Revenues and Benefits there are 34.28 FTE members of staff. Prior to its closure there would be the following number of RBCC officers attending the CSCs Monday- Friday:

- 1 x SSC Manager
- 6 x Shared Service officers working across the front desk, booths and telephony suite.
- 3 x Housing Options advisers
- 1 x Shared Service officer working at Uttoxeter

7.2 From 20th March 2020 all RBCC officers began remote working and have largely remained working from home ever since. There has been a large amount of new burdens placed on the RBCC Team throughout the pandemic. Staff had to adapt very quickly to a new way of working, all responding positively meaning that the level of service provided to the customer remained consistently high quality.

7.3 Revenues and Benefits teams have had the additional workload of business support grants and Track and Trace Support payment schemes, successfully administering and continuing to administer over ten different grants on behalf

of Central Government. This work has collectively amounted to over 15,000 applications being assessed by RBCC officers across all schemes. The department continues to provide assistance with the cost of living by administering elements of the Household Support Fund and the Energy Bills Rebate.

- 7.4 With staff being multi-disciplined across Revenues, Benefits and Customer contacts it meant that the department was able to very quickly adapt and place resources where they were most needed at any given time. Working from home meant that this was done quickly and easily with the added benefit of staff being able to use zoom technology for training in large numbers and utilise flexible working.
- 7.5 For the entirety of the CSC closures, access for customers through other channels has been quick, easy and efficient. Call wait-times to speak to someone regarding Revenues and Benefits remains within the corporate target of less than 3 minutes, and 80% of main switchboard calls are answered within 3 rings. With the CSCs closed it means that resources can be heavily placed where needed. This efficiency wouldn't have been maintained if resources were also having to be directed to face to face services.

8. Customer Service Centre re-openings

- 8.1 The Customer Service Centre in Burton re-opened on an appointment only basis on 12th October 2020 until its closure again on 5th November 2021 due to the national lockdown. The Centre re-opened again on 27th September 2021 and Uttoxeter followed on 11th October.
- 8.2 Throughout these periods the demand for face to face appointments was extremely low with customers choosing to continue to access services digitally instead of in-person as they had done during the national lockdown.

Table 2

Burton CSC appointments		
27.09.2021 - 06.12.2021	Appointments available	Appointments booked
8% appointment take up rate	413	34

Uttoxeter CSC appointments		
11.10.2021 - 06.12.2021	Appointments available	Appointments booked
4% appointment take up rate	180	8

- 8.3 Both CSCs closed again in line with government guidance on 10th December 2021 and remain closed to date.

9. Support for vulnerable groups.

- 9.1 Throughout the period where the CSCs have been closed there have been no instances that we have been made aware of that customers have struggled to provide evidence required to support benefit applications or to make a claim for benefits. Those with recovery related enquiries have also been supported without the need for face to face intervention.
- 9.2 Individuals who require extra assistance such as those with social or support workers have still been able to access services effectively, with the support staff utilising the channels described above on behalf of that individual / household. Attending in-person appointments wasn't universally preferred by vulnerable customers of those supporting them, with privacy at the CSCs and agoraphobia sometimes cited as causing additional distress.
- 9.3 Elderly and vulnerable customers will continue to be supported when accessing services digitally. The option of Housing Benefit/Council Tax reduction claims being completed by a RBCC Officer over the telephone would be available where customers aren't confident or don't have the means to use digital forms.
- 9.4 Home visits, or meetings conducted in a mutually convenient location such as the Town Hall could be utilised where other means of access have been explored and there is genuine need. This is already included in existing job descriptions, so no contractual changes would be required.

10. Delivery of the Housing Options service

- 10.1 Prior to March 2020, the majority of homeless approaches (initial contacts) and homelessness applications were conducted at the Customer Service Centre. It is believed that the reason for this was largely convention on both the part of the client and the Housing Options Team, as well as the desire for a physical signature as part of the record keeping process. Like in many other areas of the Council, for example EDRs (Executive Decision Records), new means of obtaining signatures have been adopted and conventions have changed.
- 10.2 Table 3. below demonstrates the method of contacting the Housing Options Service over a 3 year period.

Method of Contact	Burton CSC	Out of Hours	Telephone	Uttoxeter CSC	Other	Grand Total
2018						
Qtr3	104	4	70	1	29	208
Qtr4	94	2	33	1	52	182
2019						
Qtr1	102	1	48	1	63	215
Qtr2	106	7	39	1	35	188
Qtr3	146	3	46	2	24	221

2020	Qtr4	115	7	36	2	15	175
	Qtr1	122	3	53	1	25	204
	Qtr2	0	18	115		21	154
	Qtr3	0	14	121		25	160
	Qtr4	0	19	121		19	159
2021	Qtr1	0	11	140		21	172
	Qtr2	0	17	129		21	167
	Grand Total	789	106	951	9	350	2205

10.3 As the figure above demonstrates, during the 18 months that the CSC has been closed a channel shift has occurred away from the CSC as a primary route to access the Housing Options Service, and the periods when the CSC has reopened have indicated that this shift has taken hold and will be lasting. During the periods when the CSC has been open post March 2020, the Housing Options Service retained a presence each day but received zero requests from clients to attend face to face meetings at the CSC. The Housing Options Team has a collaborative approach with local organisations (including the Partnership) who call us to refer any potential homeless clients, whilst public sector partners have a duty to refer users of their service who they have reason to believe are homeless or threatened with becoming homeless within 56 days, to a local authority of the service users' choice.

10.4 Access to a telephone is very rarely an issue, but the alternatives are as follows:

- The Council's Housing Outreach Officer can meet the client where they are, provide assistance and facilitate contact with a Housing Options Advisor.
- The Council commissions a variety of rough sleeper services, including outreach services, all of whom liaise closely with the Housing Options Team. The Council has directly commissioned a Rough Sleeper Outreach Service from its own funds since 2016.
- Many rough sleepers will access the services provided at the Reconnect, such as the food bank and shower facilities, which offers access to a telephone / computer etc.

10.5 The ability to facilitate a homeless application without the need for travel has generally been well received by clients as it offers increased flexibility and confidentiality. Although a direct comparison is problematic, offering the service via telephone is likely to have reduced wait times as there was frequently a short queue to be called through from the CSC waiting area for the 'drop in' service. Currently telephone calls are answered in most cases, or when a telephone call is missed and the number is available the client is called back. The privacy afforded by telephone contact may be also be beneficial for clients in managing their emotions, or taking a break as necessary. Attendance at the CSC was previously used to collect and scan documents, however much of this information is now provided as 'online only'

which lends itself to submission by email (e.g. Universal Credit, bank statements etc.).

- 10.6 Staff have also benefitted from the periods when the CSC has been closed due to increased flexible working subject to business need, and management of VATB incidents when they occur. At the CSC there were occasions where it was necessary to call for Police assistance, and even when this was not necessary drawing a VATB encounter often required management support and could become a drawn out affair. Much of this is mitigated by the current working arrangements which simply require the termination of a phone call.
- 10.7 Therefore, the Housing Options Service has been successfully implemented in the absence of the CSC and only beneficial impacts have been observed for both staff and clients. There is no reason to believe that the service needs to return to a 2019 model of delivery to meet the needs of any particular group, or fulfil its obligations to the public.

11. Financial Considerations

This section has been approved by the following member of the Financial Management Unit: [Anya Murray]

- 11.1 Table 4 below summarises the estimated savings which could be achieved if the CSC was closed permanently from the 1 April 2022.

Type of Expenditure	Budget		
	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
	£	£	£
Premises	(6,270)	(4,940)	(5,070)
Travel	(3,910)	(3,910)	(3,910)
Supplies & Services	(10,230) *	(10,230) *	(10,230) *
Income	5,200	5,200	5,200
Estimated CSC savings	(15,210)	(13,880)	(14,010)
Transfer budget relating to credit card expenditure	4,500	4,500	4,500
Net Estimated Saving to Council	(10,710)	(9,380)	(9,510)

Notes:

Additional savings of £1,780 may be achieved in 2022/23 if the requirements for empty property relief can be met.

Credit card expenditure reflects the costs previously incurred when customers paid via the CSC self-service payment kiosk now transferring to other corporate payment methods.

* £4500 credit card expenditure also included.

Income figures are made up of a payment from SCC for assisting with Blue Badge Applications (currently administered over the phone by SCC since the pandemic) and commission from Ad-hoc ticket sales.

- 11.2 Additional savings on running costs in the region of £14k for a full year may be achieved if ESBC no longer has any responsibility for the property.

12. **Risk Assessment and Management**

- 12.1 The main risks to this Report and the Council achieving its objectives are as follows:

Positive (Opportunities/Benefits):

Customers are able to access services more efficiently when they want using digital channels

Staffing resources are able to be placed where they are required more flexibly, whilst also increasing the capacity to be able to deal with more in-depth processes and enquiries with those who require the most assistance due to vulnerabilities.

Negative (Threats):

Some customers who prefer to deal with their enquiries face to face may be disappointed with the closure of the Centre as a way of accessing services, thus affecting the Council's reputation.

- 12.2 The risks do not need to be entered in the Risk Register.

13. **Legal Considerations**

*This section has been approved by the following member of the Legal Team:
[Caroline Elwood]*

- 13.1 In reaching a decision in relation to the closure of the existing Customer Service Centres members must consider whether the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty are met. This requires the Council to consider how customers' different needs and requirements in accessing the service will be met. The Equality and Health Impact Assessment at Appendix 1 addresses this point.

14. **Equalities and Health**

- 14.1 **Equality impacts:** The subject of this Report is a policy, strategy, function or service that is new or being revised. An equality and health impact assessment is attached as Appendix 1.
- 14.2 **Health impacts:** The outcome of the health screening question does not require a full Health Impact Assessment to be completed. An equality and health impact assessment is attached as Appendix 2.
- 14.3 The main equality or health issues arising from this Report are as follows:

Continuing to ensure that customers with vulnerabilities maintain access to Services

[The equality and health impact assessment identified the following actions to be carried out:]

Is it a Health or Equality action?	Issue/impact identified	Recommendation/Action required	Lead officer and timescale	Resource allocation

15. Human Rights

15.1 There are no Human Rights issues arising from this Report.

16. Sustainability (including climate change and change adaptation measures)

16.1 Does the proposal result in an overall positive effect in terms of sustainability (including climate change and change adaptation measures) Yes

16.2 Reduction in traffic pollution due to officers not travelling into the office anymore. Customers choosing digital access channels over travelling to a physical location.

17. Recommendation(s)

17.1 Cease operation of face to face service delivery at Burton and Uttoxeter Customer Service Centres from April 2022.

17.2 Further evaluate the best use of the Customer Service Centre building in Burton up on Trent.

17.3 Further evaluate the impact of the channel shift towards digitalisation of services on current staffing resources.

18. Background Papers

18.1 Digital Strategy 2020-2023

19. Appendices

19.1 Appendix 1 EHIA