

Ref:

625/15

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Executive Decision Record

A1 Service Area:

Service Commissioning REVENUES, BENEFITS & CUSTOMER CONTACTS

A2 Title

Review of Customer Access (Revenues, Benefits & Customer Contacts)

A3 Decision Taken By

Deputy Leader/ Chief Officer

A4 Chief Officer

Please print name Sal Khan

Please sign

A5 Leader/Deputy Leader

Please print name Cllr Karen Haberfield

Please sign

A6 Date of Decision

14-Dec-2015

A7 Is this Decision confidential by containing exempt information as described in Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972?

No

A8 Which Scrutiny Committee should this decision be submitted to?

(please tick as appropriate)

Scrutiny (Promoting Local Economic Growth) Committee

Scrutiny (Value for Money Council Services) Committee

Scrutiny (Protecting and Strengthening Communities) Committee

B1 What is the Decision?

To approve the recommendations from the attached report, namely:

- Change Thursday openings at Burton Customer Service Centre to 9am to 5pm;
- Change Saturday opening times at Burton and Uttoxeter Customer Service Centres to 9am to 1pm; and
- Continue with the voicemail facility for Revenues and Benefits telephones permanently from 1pm each weekday, excepting particularly busy periods (such as Annual Billing).

B2 What are the reasons for the Decision?

The procurement and implementation of Capita Revenues and Benefits during 2014-15 has provided the Council with further opportunities to manage the contact enquiries for Revenues and Benefits, managing more enquiries on-line and by self-service.

Figures obtained from Lonsto visitor statistics software and Cisco telephone Call Agent software shows the number of face to face and telephone queries reduces from 1pm daily. Changing opening hours at the Customer Service Centres on Thursdays and Saturdays will enable the service to manage its resources more effectively, distributing them to deal with queries at our busiest times and helping to increase processing capacity where it is needed most.

B3 What are the contributions to Corporate Priorities?

This decision contributes to Value for Money Council Services.

B4 What are the Human Rights considerations?

There are no Human Rights issues arising from this decision.

B5 What are the financial implications?

There are no financial issues arising from this decision.

B6 Is the Decision wholly in accordance with the Council's policy framework?

Yes

B7 Is the Decision wholly in accordance with the Council's budget?

Yes

B8 What are the Equalities implications?

B8.1 The subject of this decision is not a policy, strategy, function or service that is new or being revised. An equality impact assessment is not required.

B9 What are the Risk Assessment implications?

B9.1 Positive (Opportunities/Benefits):

The implementation of the Benefit e-claim and the Connect e-services are providing Council Tax payers, Business Rate payers, Benefit claimants and Landlords with

more information which they can access 24/7, which means actual contact from these sources (whether fact-to-face or otherwise) will be of more meaningful value to the service in the future.

Use of voicemail facility will enable processing staff to clear the daily workload, maintaining performance targets and continuing the roll-out of training for multi-skilled staff.

B9.2 Negative (Threats):

Customers without internet access will still have to contact the Council in the normal manner when offices are open.

B9.3 The risks do not need to be entered in the Risk Register. Any financial implications to mitigate against these risks are considered above.

B10 What are the Legal Considerations?

B10.1 There are no significant legal issues arising from this decision.

B11 What are the Sustainability implications?

B11.1 The proposal [would/would not] result in an overall positive effect in terms of sustainability (including climate change and change adaptation measures). The positive/negative impacts are set out below (*please refer to guidance notes*). Not applicable.

B12 What are the Health & Safety implications?

B12.1 A Risk Assessment has not been carried out and entered into Harriet for all significant hazards and risks because there are no significant hazards or risks arising from this decision.

B13. Is this a Key Decision?

No

NOTE: If this decision is subject to the Call-in Procedure it will come into force, and may then be implemented, on the expiry of 3 working days after publication – unless 10 Members of the Council call in the decision.

Please send the original signed document to Andrea Davies, Democratic Services.



EAST STAFFORDSHIRE BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT COVER SHEET

Title of Report:	Review of Customer Access (Revenues, Benefits & Customer Contacts)
Meeting of:	Cabinet
Date:	14 th December 2015
Is this an Executive Decision:	[NO]
Is this a Key Decision:	[NO]
Is the Report Confidential:	[NO]
If so, please state relevant paragraph from Schedule 12A LGA 1972:	
<p>Essential Signatories:</p> <p>ALL REPORTS MUST BE IN THE NAME OF A HEAD OF SERVICE</p> <p>Monitoring Officer: Angela Wakefield</p> <p>Date Signature</p> <p>Chief Finance Officer: Sal Khan</p> <p>Date Signature</p>	

EAST STAFFORDSHIRE BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Cabinet

Date: 14th December 2015

REPORT TITLE: Review of Customer Access (Revenues, Benefits & Customer Contacts)

PORTFOLIO: Service Commissioning

HEAD OF SERVICE: Sal Khan

CONTACT OFFICER: Sarah Richardson Ext. No. x1716

WARD(S) AFFECTED: None

1. Purpose of the Report

1.1. To approve changes for residents to access the Revenues, Benefits and Customer Contacts services.

2. Executive Summary

2.1. The procurement and implementation of Capita Revenues and Benefits during 2014-15 has provided the Council with further opportunities to manage the contact enquiries for Revenues and Benefits, managing more enquiries on-line and by self-service.

3. Background

3.1. The Council's Customer Service Centres have been in place since 2007 with around 50,000 visitors being received at Burton and Uttoxeter in a 12 month period, covering a whole range of queries. In 2011, the Council conducted a Customer Satisfaction Survey to gauge customer satisfaction with the Customer Service Centres. The survey showed that 83% of customers were either satisfied or very satisfied with the service.

3.2. The Council's switchboard can receive around 76,000 callers over a twelve month period. Since 2013 monitoring of the number of callers to the Council Tax and Benefits hunt group telephone numbers has also been conducted,

with around 50,000 calls being received by both groups over the same length of time.

- 3.3. Staff at the Customer Service Centres (CSCs) in the Market Place, Burton upon Trent and the Library in Uttoxeter deal with face to face queries about Housing Benefit, Council Tax, Planning, Blue Badges, Waste Management, Highways, etc (this list is not exhaustive). Each customer visit is registered on the Lonsto queueing system which provides reports on what service the customer required help with. The reports also provide how many visitors have been to both of the CSCs over a number of time scales (eg, daily, weekly, monthly, etc).
- 3.4. Both CSCs are open six days each week, Monday to Saturday, from 9am to 5pm each day apart from Wednesdays and Thursdays. When the CSCs were implemented in 2007 it was agreed that both would open late on a Wednesday to factor in staff training, and so Burton CSC opens at 9.45am on a Wednesday whilst Uttoxeter CSC opens at 10.30am on a Wednesday (to enable staff to travel to the CSC from Burton following their training). On Thursdays, Burton CSC is open until 6pm for customer queries.
- 3.5. Until September 2015, anyone wishing to make a claim for Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Reduction was required to present themselves to either CSC to make their claim. The process took around 45 minutes to an hour to complete the application and identify the evidence required to satisfy the claim. The new Capita system includes an electronic Claim Form (an 'e-claim') which has been implemented on the Council's website from September 2015 for customers to make their claim online 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; therefore removing the need for the customer to present themselves to the CSC during opening times to make their claim.
- 3.6. The Council closed its Cash Office facility in 2008 and at the same time implemented a system of barcode payments for Council Tax, Business Rates and Sundry Debts in conjunction with Payzone, offering a number of outlets for residents and organisations to pay their bills. In addition, a 24 hour Telephone Payment Line was also implemented to encourage residents to pay their bills by Debit or Credit card without having to wait for Council offices to be open.
- 3.7. Both CSCs are equipped with 'Chip and Pin' machines to take debit and credit card payments, but this does have an impact on the number of visitors seen at the CSCs especially around Council Tax instalment dates of 1st or 15th of the month. Visitors continue to pay at the CSCs rather than using the other forms of payment methods available: Direct Debit, 24 hour telephone payments line, internet banking, Payzone, standing order, cheques through the post.
- 3.8. Revenues visitor queries at the CSCs are increased when reminders and summonses for non-payment are issued by the Council, whereas on a 'normal' day the queries tend to be in relation to changes in circumstance and liability. The new Capita system includes a 'Connect' electronic services ('e-

services') option which allows Council Tax payers and Business Rates payers to view the status of their relevant Council Tax and Business Rates accounts, along with the facility to view the latest bills and notices issued to them. The Connect e-service was implemented on the Council's website in September 2015. Once fully in place, Council Tax and Business Rates payers will be able to inform the Council of changes in liability as well as setting up Direct Debit instructions online.

3.9. Benefit claimants can use Connect e-service to view their Benefit claim details, so they can see at a glance what payments they are entitled to and a copy of their last notification which explained the benefit calculation.

3.10. Landlords can use the Connect e-service to view the Housing Benefit payment schedules for their tenants. Trent and Dove Housing Association was the first Landlord to sign up to the service, and we have had positive comments from them on how convenient it is for them to access that service without having to contact the Benefits team direct.

4. Contribution to Corporate Priorities

4.1. This report contributes to 'Value for Money Council Services' Corporate Priority.

5. Customer Service Centres access

5.1. Corporate Performance Indicator VFM20 required an evaluation of the current access to Revenues, Benefits and Customer Contacts which was completed in June 2015. Visitor and caller numbers were obtained from Lonsto and the Cisco Telephone system covering June 2014, September 2014, December 2014, March 2015 and June 2015. This period covered the busiest time of the year when new bills and notices are issued in March, along with contact peaks and troughs during the rest of the year. Table 1, below, shows the number of visitors over that period who visited the CSC in Burton daily and per hour:

Table 1.

	9am to 10am	10am to 11am	11am to 12pm	12pm to 1pm	1pm to 2pm	2pm to 3pm	3pm to 4pm	4pm to 5pm	5pm to 6pm	
Totals										
Mondays	472	483	545	508	432	381	257	255	0	3333
Tuesdays	319	408	396	378	322	264	254	151	0	2492
Wednesdays	76	319	266	235	250	164	127	115	0	1552
Thursdays	195	251	214	223	201	199	133	114	27	1557
Fridays	219	266	303	307	246	188	143	112	0	1784
Saturdays	127	176	202	191	152	123	80	37	0	1088

5.2. These figures show that the majority of visitors to Burton CSC are in the morning, tailing off from 2pm in the afternoon. Mondays and Tuesdays are the busiest days of the week.

5.3. In comparison table 2, below, shows visitor figures from Uttoxeter CSC per month rather than daily and hourly:

Table 2

Jun-14	278
Sep-14	320
Dec-14	278
Mar-15	361
Jun-15	321

5.4. This table shows that the number of visitors to Uttoxeter CSC in one month is similar to the number of visitors in an hour on a particular day at Burton CSC.

5.5. The figures show that late night opening on Thursdays are poorly attended by visitors and therefore it is proposed that Burton CSC closes at 5pm each Thursday night, rather than 6pm, with effect from January 2016. Customers will be able to continue making their payments by the payment methods mentioned earlier in this report; can continue to make claims for Housing Benefit online and can also access details of their Council Tax or Business Rates accounts online.

5.6. Saturdays are the least busiest day at both CSCs, with visitor numbers tailing off from 1pm. Therefore, it is proposed that both CSCs close at 1pm on Saturdays with effect from January 2016. Again, customers will continue to have access to online services.

5.7. Due to the numbers of visitors involved it is not necessary to have a full complement of staff at the CSC on Saturdays, and so there is a rota for staff to work Saturdays with a rest day in the following week. Changing the open times to 4 hours on a Saturday rather than 8 means that staff will only require 4 hour rest period in the following week rather than a whole day, which provides more resource during the week to concentrate on processing the daily workload within the service, providing a much quicker turnaround of processes received and improving on the 'right time' indicator.

6. Telephone access

6.1 Cisco VOIP call agent software has been implemented on the Council Tax and Benefits telephone hunt groups since 2013 and more recently, in 2014, on the Switchboard. The software allows messages to be played to the caller with a choice of prompts for the caller to be put through to the relevant

service. This has enabled calls to be managed smarter, as the vast majority of calls coming through to the Council are for Council Tax, Benefits and Waste Management.

6.2 Furthermore, the first prompt offered to callers is to ask if they wish to make a payment, and on pressing the number 1 callers are immediately transferred to the 24 hour payment line, so by-passing the need to speak to the switchboard operator or a member of the Council Tax team in order to pay their Council Tax bill.

6.3 Figures have been taken from June 2014, September 2014, December 2014, March 2015 and June 2015 which show the number of calls to Council Tax and Benefits per hour each day. Table 3, below, shows those results and the average number of calls taken per hour:

Table 3.

Totals	9am to 10am	10am to 11am	11am to 12pm	12pm to 1pm	1pm to 2pm	2pm to 3pm	3pm to 4pm	4pm to 5pm	
Mondays	1181	985	930	889	545	573	499	387	5989
Tuesdays	758	554	501	468	292	277	316	222	3388
Wednesdays	565	533	516	442	359	376	289	303	3383
Thursdays	557	517	499	523	319	315	320	246	3296
Fridays	621	518	509	504	310	343	234	239	3278
	3682	3107	2955	2826	1825	1884	1658	1397	
Average									
Mondays	147.6	123.1	116.3	111.1	68.1	71.6	62.4	48.4	748.6
Tuesdays	94.8	69.3	62.6	58.5	36.5	34.6	39.5	27.8	423.5
Wednesdays	70.6	66.6	64.5	55.3	44.9	47.0	36.1	37.9	422.9
Thursdays	69.6	64.6	62.4	65.4	39.9	39.4	40.0	30.8	412.0
Fridays	77.6	64.8	63.6	63.0	38.8	42.9	29.3	29.9	409.8

6.4 The figures in table 3 show that the majority of callers to Council Tax and Benefits are before 1pm. Mondays and Tuesdays are the busiest days of the week, similar to the number of visitors to the CSC.

6.5 Since June 2015, a trial has been conducted within Revenues and benefits with a voicemail facility being offered to callers from 1pm each day. The next working day, all voicemails are retrieved and the callers telephoned back that day, normally before 1pm. We have had requests for call-backs later in the day once callers have finished work, etc, which have been done as requested.

6.6 So far, no formal complaints have been received regarding the voicemail facility being used, even when reminders and summonses have been issued. Not having telephone calls after 1pm enables more processing to be completed as staff are not disturbed by constant interruptions. Therefore, it is proposed that the voicemail facility be continued within Revenues and Benefits for the foreseeable future, excepting particularly busy periods such as Annual Billing.

6.7 Calls to the main switchboard have also been monitored for the same period as the Council tax and Benefits calls, as shown in table 4, below:

Table 4

	9am to 10am	10am to 11am	11am to 12pm	12pm to 1pm	1pm to 2pm	2pm to 3pm	3pm to 4pm	4pm to 5pm	
Jun-14	816	766	728	629	517	672	562	488	5178
Sep-14	656	567	509	417	398	471	408	360	3786
Dec-14	466	397	349	282	267	350	300	227	2638
Mar-15	783	658	621	482	420	544	469	385	4362
Jun-15	684	605	570	506	538	509	451	410	4273
	3405	2993	2777	2316	2140	2546	2190	1870	

6.8 The same call-agent software used in Council Tax and benefits was installed on the switchboard in June 2014. Once callers are connected to the switchboard, they are presented with prompts to forward their call to the appropriate department. Table 4 shows the reduction in calls to the switchboard as a result of the software being in use. Calls to the Council always peak in March due to annual billing, however it can be seen clearly that calls received in March 2015 are not as high as those received in June 2014, which shows how well the call routing is working.

7. Financial Considerations

This section has been approved by the following member of the Financial Management Unit: Sal Khan, Head of Finance.

7.1. There are no financial issues arising from this Report.

8. Risk Assessment and Management

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

8.2. **Positive** (Opportunities/Benefits):

8.2.1. The implementation of the Benefit e-claim and the Connect e-services are providing Council Tax payers, Business Rates payers, Benefit claimants and Landlords with more information that they can access 24/7, which means actual contact from these sources (whether face-to-face or otherwise) will be of more meaningful value to the service in the future.

8.2.2. Calls to the Council are managed more effectively, being forwarded to the appropriate service with less dependency on a number of switchboard operatives being in place.

8.2.3. Use of voicemail facility will enable processing staff to clear the daily workload, maintaining performance targets and continuing the roll out of training for multi-skilled staff.

8.2.4. Reducing CSC opening times will enable resources to be used more practically.

8.3. **Negative** (Threats):

8.3.1. Customers without internet access will still have to contact the Council in the normal manner when offices are open.

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

9. **Legal Considerations**

*This section has been approved by the following member of the Legal Team:
Angela Wakefield.*

9.1. There are no significant legal issues arising from this Report.

10. **Equalities and Health**

10.1. **Equality impacts:** The subject of this Report is not a policy, strategy, function or service that is new or being revised. An equality and health impact assessment is not required.

10.2. **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 not required.

11. **Human Rights**

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

12. **Sustainability** (including climate change and change adaptation measures)

12.1. Does the proposal result in an overall positive effect in terms of sustainability (including climate change and change adaptation measures)
N/A

13. Recommendation(s)

13.1. To consider the following options:

13.1.1 To change Burton CSC opening times on Thursdays to 9am to 5pm with effect from January 2016.

13.1.2 To change Burton and Uttoxeter CSCs opening times on Saturdays to 9am to 1pm with effect from January 2016.

13.1.3 To continue with the voicemail facility within Revenues and Benefits each weekday afternoon from 1pm for the foreseeable future (excepting particularly busy periods such as Annual Billing).

13.2. These options will enable staff to be redeployed elsewhere in the service; taking advantage of training already provided and planned for the future for multi-skilled staff; allowing staff to focus more on processing to clear workload and improve on 'right time' indicators.

14. Background Papers

None

15. Appendices

None