

**REPORT TO: PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE & EXECUTIVE**  
**Date of Meeting: 1 SEPTEMBER 2016 & 13 SEPTEMBER 2016**  
**Report of: Assistant Director Customer Access**  
**Title: Review of Extended Opening in the Customer Service Centre**

**Is this a Key Decision?**

No

**Is this an Executive or Council Function?**

**Executive**

**1. What is the report about?**

This report is a review of extended opening on Mondays and Thursdays in the Customer Service Centre and Call Centre.

**2. Recommendations:**

That Executive considers for the efficiency of the service, the amendment of opening hours to 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday from 31 October 2016.

**3. Reasons for the recommendation:**

Data collected on footfall and telephones shows that demand between 5pm and 6pm is very small in relation to the minimum number of staff required to keep the Centre open for this extended time. Officers' view is that resources could be used more efficiently to protect and increase the Council's income by Customer Service Officers (CSOs) doing case working, pursuing debt owed to the Council, processing council tax changes and reviews of discounts and exemptions.

**4. What are the resource implications including non financial resources.**

There are no resource implications.

**5. Section 151 Officer comments:**

There are no financial implications contained in the report.

**6. What are the legal aspects?**

There are no legal aspects to consider

**7. Monitoring Officer's comments:**

This report raises no issues for the Monitoring Officer.

## **8. Report details:**

- 8.1 On average, CSOs assist 2 customers in the Customer Service Centre, and deal with 13 telephone enquiries through the Corporate Call centre between 5:00-6:00pm. These figures cover the period 1<sup>st</sup> July 2015 to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2016.
- 8.2 Each extended opening requires 3 CSOs to be present in the Customer Service Centre, 1 Security & Assistance Officer, 1 Manager/Team Leader, 2 Customer Support Officers in the Call Centre and 4 'on Pull' staff to be available across the specialist technical areas of Housing Benefit, Local Welfare Support, Council Tax Billing, Payment and Collections and Housing Advice. This represents a total of 11 hours of staff time.
- 8.3 On average, Customer Support Officers spend a total of 54 minutes face to face and 35 minutes on the phone during each extended opening period. That is a total of 1 hour 29 minutes spent serving customers, compared to 11 hours of staff time to run the service.
- 8.4 Over the last 12 months (97 5pm-6pm periods), there have been 27 occasions where no customers have come in during extended hours (28%), and 29 occasions where only 1 customer has come in (30%). So in 58% of extended hours shifts, we have served 1 customer or less face to face.
- 8.5 Of the 1,845 presentations to Housing Options in the last 12 months, none have been on Mondays or Thursdays between 5pm and 6pm, and only 69 (4%) have been after 4pm on any day.
- 8.6 As no other service outside of the 'Help me with my financial/housing problem' system is required to provide cover for extended opening, Customer Support Officers can find themselves unable to deal fully with enquiries they receive in the Customer Service Centre or through switchboard calls, which can cause frustration for customers who believe that the whole Council is open between 5pm to 6pm on these occasions..
- 8.7 Closing at 5pm on Mondays and Thursdays would free up 2 hours per week of Security & Assistance Officer time, which could be better utilised during busy core opening hours as we are seeing customers with more challenging behaviour.
- 8.8 In our efforts to develop a more flexible workforce for the System, there is an on-going project to upskill frontline officers to be able to complete more enquiries at the first point of contact, and to service different types of demand across all the specialist sections that make up the 'Help me' system. Ending extended opening would free up staff time and allow the service to push forward with this project. The more skills staff have, the more they can be utilised to keep work up to date, which in turn helps to reduce failure demand as customers are not then contacting to chase progress on cases. Staff are also needed for pro-active work that either protects the Council's income or brings revenue into the Council, such as discount and exemption reviews or data matching to identify businesses that should be paying Business Rates.
- 8.9 Staff supporting the Customer Support Officers during extended opening could also use this time to be proactively contacting customers to address financial issues or completing other processing and case work.

- 8.10 For comparison, Torbay Council's call centre is open from 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday and its face to face service, soon to be solely based in Paignton, also has opening hours of 9am to 5pm. Plymouth City Council's call centre and 1 stop shop is open Monday to Saturday with closing varying between 5pm and 8pm. As Exeter City Council's extended opening on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays has not generated significant demand, this would not be a recommended model.

**9. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?**

Customers have not taken up the opportunity to utilise the offer of 6pm opening and responding to this shows we are focusing on customers' needs. There are two aspects to how ending extended opening does this. Firstly, it means that Customer Support staff will be more likely to be available during times of higher demand. Secondly, using Customer Support staff to process work across the System moves us further away from traditional departmental approaches, which have prevented the system from working in a dynamic and flexible way.

**10. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?**

The main risk is that a minimal number of customers will be unable to access the Council's services currently available during extended opening, perhaps because they are working from 9am to 5pm. However, previous extended hours check work highlighted that, in the majority of cases, customers who visit between 5pm and 6pm were able to access the service at another time during normal opening hours. For those customers who have an emergency query, they can still call on the emergency out of hours line. Therefore, the conclusion is that the risk is minimal.

It is also expected that there will be pro-active call outs to customers who are particularly vulnerable and have difficulty accessing our services, particularly if they are in debt with the Council.

There will also be press releases to advise the public of any change to opening hours as well as publicity on the Council's website, in the Citizen and in the Customer Service Centre.

**11. What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, community safety and the environment?**

Since opening hours were first changed to include Saturday mornings, then Thursdays 5:00-7:00pm and finally to the current pattern, no significant benefit has been observed in any of these areas that would justify the use of staff and other resources. Therefore, it is expected that there will be no impact of this decision in these areas.

**12. Are there any other options?**

A number of options have already been trialled with similar outcomes in all cases. If opening hours were to remain the same the only other option, in terms of pushing forward with flexible ways of working and providing maximum cover in busier periods, would be to increase resources. However, this would not represent an efficient use of resources.

Bindu Arjoon  
**Assistant Director Customer Access**

**Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)**

**Background papers used in compiling this report:-**

None

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