

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCILCABINET1 December 2016Report by Deputy Chief ExecutiveCUSTOMER SERVICES OPENING HOURS**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1. The purpose of this report is to advise members of a review of customer service centres opening hours and to seek members' agreement to changes in the service centre opening hours to reflect the Council's drive to encourage more customers to access services online.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

2. It is recommended that the Cabinet approve the change to opening hours in the Customer Service centres in HQ and Barrhead acknowledging the expected impact.

**BACKGROUND**

3. Customer First was established in 2001 comprising of two services centres open from 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. in HQ and Barrhead. There is a telephone contact centre handling all calls and customer contact is also managed via online and email.

4. As part of the Council's drive to encourage more of our customers to access our services online, a review has taken place of the opening hours of Customer Service centres. The outcome of the review is a recommendation to reduce the opening hours of the Customer Service centres at both HQ and Barrhead from 8.00 a.m. – 6.00 p.m. to 8.45 a.m. - 4.45 p.m. from 1 April 2017.

**PROPOSAL**

5. A review was undertaken which considered the level of footfall by members of the public accessing Council services via our two Customer Service Centres in HQ and Barrhead particularly at either end of the day when extended hours are available. Initial data showed that on average there are 4 customers before 9.00 am and 5 customers after 5.00 pm across both centres and 26 calls before 9 am and 13 calls after 5pm each day.

Further detailed analysis of specific data between April and September 2016 showed that there were on average 2 customers between 8.00 a.m. and 8.45 a.m. and 6 customers between 4.45 p.m. and 6.00 p.m. across both service centres per day. The higher number of customers visiting after 4.45 p.m. at HQ tends to be taxi drivers and employees with PVG documentation and at Barrhead it tends to be HSCP clients.

6. As a consequence of the relatively low demand during these periods it is proposed that the opening times of Customer Services centres are changed in both HQ and Barrhead from 8 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. to 8.45 a.m. to 4.45 p.m. As part of the review some targeted conversations with customers were undertaken to assess the impact.

7. If the hours of Customer First were changed then Service centre, reception cover, Live chat services and full telephone cover would be available between 8.45 a.m. and 4.45 p.m. Out with these hours there would be limited telephone cover with calls being appropriately prioritised. Council officers would be available in and around the reception area during 8.00 a.m. and 8.45 a.m. and 4.45 p.m. and 6.00 p.m.

## **FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF CUSTOMER SERVICE**

8. Online services will continue to be promoted to encourage more customers to access services self-service. Many of our customers are comfortable with digital technology and indeed expect to be able to access and communicate with Councils using digital technology 24/7 at a time that suits them. They expect the same service they get from commercial organisations. Digital technology allows those customers who can self-serve to do so which provides us with the opportunity to refocus the resources of the service on those customers who most need face to face support and who are most vulnerable.

9. Our focus going forward will be on how we can encourage more customers online. The objective is to provide the best customer service possible using the most efficient channels and ensure the customer experience, whichever channel is used to contact us, is the best it can be within the resources we have available to us. Some areas we are actively developing include:

- Communication campaign.

A soft launch Communications campaign will begin on 9 January which will be a rolling programme throughout the year to encourage residents to access available services online where they are able to do so. The Communications team are working with Customer Services to determine priority areas for the campaign to ensure the customer journey access in these areas is the best it can be. Customer services will continue to promote what you can do online by sending out web address links and promoting through telephone messages.

- Gadget bars

Gadget bars go live in HQ and Barrhead on 21 November. These will allow Customer Service Officers (CSOs) to demonstrate to customers how to access services online encouraging channel shift. A floor walking model will be used and Customer First will continually review the approach based on customer feedback.

- Social customer service

Currently Live Chat is used by CSOs to support customers who are accessing online services. This service has received very positive feedback and allows customers to link directly through the online system with a CSO who can respond to any queries they have and assist them with the online experience. In future CSOs will take on a wider social customer service role responding to all customer service related questions through our social media channels. This will take e-communication to the next level and build on the successes of the online live chat service and email responses.

- Digital user experience

Resource will be put in place to identify, prioritise and build high quality digital services and online customer solutions which will be focused on the customer journey from beginning to end.

- Service improvement.

There will be a review of all customer services to identify which services could be offered exclusively online. The team will work with services longer term to develop further end to end customer services and will monitor volume usage to respond to any peaks. It should be noted that there will be exceptions where services continue to be offered through multiple channels.

- MyAccount

MyAccount is a national sign-in service which gives online customer access to national and local services. It will provides a single view of the customer which will help us deliver improved services by knowing and understanding our customers better. A data matching exercise across multiple systems has started to underpin this.

- Appointments

An appointment system has already been introduced for registration and Council House sign ups which makes better use of staff face to face time. The plan is to roll this out to other complex face to face customer interactions, for example taxi licensing and benefits.

10. Success in these areas and moving more customer demand online will ensure that employees are freed up to deal with the more complex situations and those customers who are unable to access online services and who need one to one assistance most.

11. Customer services will monitor the usage levels of access via face to face, phone, email and online to determine the success of the channel shift activities. It is acknowledged that there may be longer queue times on phone, longer email response time and longer waiting times in customer service centres for face to face however service standards will continue to be monitored and reviewed to ensure they remain within acceptable standards and with appropriate action taken if required.

## CONSULTATION

12. As part of the review of opening hours some consultation with service users was undertaken to understand the potential impact. This took the form of a public conversation with customers who visited the service centres between 8.00 a.m. – 8.45 a.m. and 4.45 p.m. and 6.00 p.m. over a two week period.

13. The public conversation was a targeted engagement exercise with customers who used the services during the early and late opening hours and it had the following objectives:

- To set out and explain the reasons for the proposed changes.
- To ascertain the views of current and potential users.

14. A total of 116 people who visited and called in contributed to the conversation. The results showed that 60% of those asked often came in during the early and late opening hours and 40% of those asked would be able to come in during office hours. Of the enquiries made 20% could have been completed online and a third of customers were not aware that they could do this. Customers were also asked if there were other things the council could do to make access to information and support easier. Approximately a third indicated that there was nothing to improve, one quarter liked the early and later opening times and the remaining feedback was in specific areas where action could be taken. For example access for taxi licensing will be covered through appointment bookings, customers felt there were better response times during early and late hours so improvements should be seen during office hours as our channel shift strategy improves and customers who do not have access to online facilities will be able to use the gadget bars during these times. Some customers indicated that they would prefer online access.

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For those customers that made comments these can be categorised as follows:

Nothing to improve	20
Keep early/late times	18
Need access for taxi licensing	8
Lack of response online	3
Better response times early/late	7
Prefer not online	4
No access to online facilities	5
Would like more online	3

15. Trade Union and employee consultation has been initiated to inform that if this recommendation is accepted there would be deletion of 3 CSO posts. This reduction would be achieved through non-renewal of temporary contracts and a review of all flexible working arrangements to support the new rota pattern and if accepted will provide a saving of £57,000.

16. Consultation has also started with internal customers in the areas of Corporate and Community Services, Education, Environment and HSCP.

## IMPLICATIONS

17. The implementation process will have implications for customers so there will be a channel shift communications campaign informing residents of all the options available for accessing council services.

18. An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed as part of this recommended service change.

## OPTIONS APPRAISAL

19. A number of options were considered as part of this review as follows:

Option 1	Reduce opening hours from 8.00 am – 6.00 pm to 8.45 am – 4.45 pm
Option 2	Close both service centres in HQ and Barrhead on Wednesdays pm
Option 3	Close service centres in HQ and Barrhead on Wednesdays all day

The footfall per day for each of the options is 8, 44 and 88 customers respectively. The volume of calls is also significantly greater in options 2 and 3.

From a customer demand perspective the most suitable option which minimised the impact on customer was considered to be option 1 to change the opening hours at either end of the working day when footfall is at its lightest. As the channel shift strategy progresses and more customers choose to access services online options 2 and 3 may be worthy of reconsideration and this will be kept under review. This option also ensures that resources are targeted at the areas where the volume of customer demand dictates.

## CONCLUSIONS

20. Customer services currently offers a number of services online to the customer and through a number of development activities looks to provide the best customer service possible using the most efficient channels.

21. There is relatively low demand in both service centres between 8.00 a.m. – 8.45 a.m. and 4.45 p.m. and 6.00 p.m. which supports the recommendation to change the opening hours although it is acknowledged that there will be some customer impact.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

22. It is recommended that the Cabinet approve the change to opening hours in the Customer Service centres in HQ and Barrhead acknowledging the expected impact.

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