

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

20 June 2019

Report of the Director of Central Services and Deputy Chief Executive

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet

1 REVIEW OF CUSTOMER SERVICE SURGERIES

Summary

This report sets out a review of the Customer Service Surgeries at Snodland, Larkfield and Borough Green and presents options for further consideration

1.1 Introduction

- 1.1.1 At a previous meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee it was agreed that a review be undertaken into the future of the Customer Service surgeries at Snodland, Larkfield and Borough Green.
- 1.1.2 This report seeks to set out the basis for the review and provide options for further consideration. Members are invited to review the service these surgeries provide to the local communities against the low footfall and running costs.
- 1.1.3 Members are asked to note that the surgery at Borough Green closed in April 2017.

1.2 Background

- 1.2.1 The Council has historically provided customer service surgeries, at the following locations -

Larkfield Library, Martin Square, Larkfield

Snodland Library, 15-17 High Street, Snodland

Borough Green Library, High Street, Borough Green (closed since April 2017)

- 1.2.2 All 3 surgeries are / were located within libraries operated by Kent County Council and are, or have been open for enquiries 1 day per week (Borough Green and Snodland) and 2 days a week for Larkfield. Only 1 member of the customer services team will be present at each surgery at any one time.

- 1.2.3 The surgeries at Snodland (Fridays) and Larkfield (Mondays/ Tuesday) are open between 09:00 hours and 12:30 hours.
- 1.2.4 The surgery at Borough Green has been closed since April 2017, but historically opened between 09.00 and 15.15 hours every Wednesday. The library at Borough Green is closed on Wednesdays, so the surgery operated alongside the Citizens Advice Bureau, to ensure that the customer services representative was not working alone on the premises.
- 1.2.5 At Larkfield surgery the Borough Council works in partnership with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), as the CAB Officers arrange appointments for people to come and see them during the open session.
- 1.2.6 The Borough Council pays rent to Kent County Council for the hire of the libraries to enable the surgeries to be held. The rate is different depending on the Surgery. Further details of each surgery in respect of average weekly enquiries, the top 3 interactions and costs are set out below.
- 1.2.7 Members are asked to note that when the surgeries were originally set up in 2006, there was a requirement for claimants to bring in original documents for Revenues and Benefits. With the move towards digital delivery of services, claimants are now able to send such documentation to the Council by electronic means. This has of course had a consequential impact upon the need for surgeries in these locations.

1.3 Snodland

- 1.3.1 The surgery has been provided at Snodland Library since 2006.
- 1.3.2 Details of the footfall at the surgery during 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 are set out in the table at **Annex 1**.

Year	Average number of weekly enquiries
2016 – 2017	8.8
2017 – 2018	8.5
2018 – 2019	8.2
2019 – 2020 (Apr-May)	5.1

1.3.3 The top 3 interactions are:

Service	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Benefits	326	309	296
Housing	74	57	53
Council Tax	33	65	51

1.3.4 All other interactions are in single figures.

1.3.5 The costs of operating the surgery at Snodland are set out below.

Service	Cost	Cost per year
Rent to KCC each quarter	£325	£1,300
Staff – 09:00 hours until 12:30 hours at £15 an hour.	£52.50	£2,730
Total		£4,030

1.4 Larkfield

1.4.1 The surgery has been provided at Larkfield Library since 2006.

1.4.2 Details of the footfall at the surgery during 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 are set out in the table at **Annex 2**.

Year	Average number of weekly enquiries
2016 - 2017	12.61
2017 - 2018	12.25

2018 – 2019	12.63
2019 – 2020 (Apr-May)	12.55

1.4.3 The top 3 interactions are:

Service	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Benefits	513	468	492
Housing	50	63	59
Council Tax	29	57	57

1.4.4 The costs of operating the surgery at Larkfield are set out below.

Service	Cost	Cost per year
Rent to KCC each quarter	£487.50	£1,950
CAB Officer per quarter	£1,500	£6,000
Staff – 09:00 hours until 12:30 hours at £15 an hour	£105.00	£5,460
Total		£13,410

1.5 Borough Green

1.5.1 This surgery closed in April 2017

1.5.2 The costs of operating the surgery at Borough Green are set out below. Members are asked to note that no budget provision has been made since the surgery closed in April 2017 and as such would represent budget growth and, in turn, add to the required savings and transformation contribution (funding gap).

Service	Cost	Cost per year
Rent to KCC each quarter	£617.66	£2,471

CAB Officer per quarter	£1,500	£6,000
Staff – 09:00 hours until 15:15 hours at £15 an hour	£93.75	£4,875
Total		£13,346

Total costs of surgeries

1.5.3 The total cost of surgeries (if all three were operational) would be:

Service	Cost per year
Snodland	£4,030
Larkfield	£13,410
Borough Green	£13,346
Total	£30,786

1.6 Analysis/ options

1.6.1 Members will note that the costs of operating the surgeries is high in comparison to the footfall. Indeed, the average number of weekly enquiries at each location are very low – 8.2 (Snodland - 2018/19), 12.63 (Larkfield - 2018/19). On a purely financial case, there is a strong argument that the costs of providing the surgeries are unsustainable. However, Members will of course wish to balance the costs against the wider community benefit of providing customer services at the locations in question.

1 - Close surgeries

1.6.2 In the event that Members were minded to pursue this option, customers would still be able to have their queries answered on-line, on the phone or be able to speak face to face to a customer services representative at Kings Hill or Tonbridge Castle (the latter of these is probably less likely given the location of the existing surgeries). It is however possible that some residents are unable for a variety of reasons to readily travel to the Council Offices, so this may inconvenience those who are not able to communicate with the Council through other means.

- 1.6.3 There would be a budget saving in respect of payments made to KCC and the CAB of £9,250 plus a reduction in the temporary staff budget of £8,190, giving a total budget saving of £17,440.
- 1.6.4 Members are asked to note that we would need to give the CAB notice of any intended closure.

2 – Keep some or all surgeries open

- 1.6.5 As an alternative, Members may wish to consider whether some or all of the surgeries should remain open noting that reopening Borough Green would represent budget growth.
- 1.6.6 The surgery at Borough Green has been closed since April 2017. We are not aware of any negative impact brought about by this closure, so there is not considered to be any basis for re-opening this surgery. Even if the opening hours of this surgery were reduced to bring it into line with Larkfield and Snodland, the historic low number of weekly enquiries would suggest that the operating costs would remain high by comparison.
- 1.6.7 Members may however wish to consider whether the other 2 surgeries should remain open.

1.7 Legal Implications

- 1.7.1 None arising from this report.

1.8 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.8.1 The financial considerations are set out above.

1.9 Equality Impact Assessment

- 1.9.1 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.
- 1.9.2 If Members are minded to close surgeries, consideration will be given to a Equality Impact Assessment.

1.10 Policy Considerations

- 1.10.1 The digital delivery of services is one of the key objectives of the current IT Strategy, as agreed by the Finance, Innovation and Property Advisory Board on 23 May 2018. Therefore, in evaluating the future of the customer service surgeries, we need to be mindful of the strategy of encouraging and moving customers to an on-line digital platform service delivery.

1.11 Recommendations

1.11.1 It is **RECOMMENDED** that Members review the future provision of the customer service surgeries set out in this paper.

1.11.2

Background papers:

None

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