

**TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL**  
**FINANCE, INNOVATION & PROPERTY ADVISORY BOARD**

**21 July 2021**

**Report of the Director of Central Services & Deputy Chief Executive**

**Part 1- Public**

**Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Non-Key Decision**

**1 CUSTOMER SERVICES**

**This report asks Members to consider proposals for the future opening hours and operation of Customer Services**

**1.1 Background - Pre-pandemic**

**Kings Hill**

- 1.1.1 Kings Hill reception operated a drop-in service to residents for council Services Monday to Friday, facilitating support for the payment kiosk, and providing a Meet & Greet facility for visitors to the building who were attending meetings.
- 1.1.2 The drop-in service to residents required that advisors were on duty at the reception counters waiting for a resident to walk in for advice, this ultimately created an environment where advisors are not always serving a resident and will be sitting around unutilised and therefore not an effective use of their time/resource.
- 1.1.3 In between customers, advisors would be responding to webchat enquiries or answering the switchboard. The challenge for this business model is that visitors attending receptions are listening in on confidential discussions with another resident.
- 1.1.4 The Current Call Centre Pilot moves the Customer Services advisors away from the front line, focusing on customer service delivery dealing with multiple service enquiries from one person during one call. This has resulted in a more efficient and effective service delivery.

**Tonbridge Castle**

- 1.1.5 The Castle operated a drop-in service to residents for council services Monday to Friday along with facilitating support for the payment kiosk. In addition, Monday to Sunday advisors also provided services to support Tourism, Shop, Castle

attraction, conference and meetings, as well as running educational workshops and guided tours.

## **1.2 During lockdown**

- 1.2.1 As both receptions closed to the public during lockdown, freeing up advisors from reception duties, which has allowed the team/teams to answer calls from back offices as part of the Call Centre Pilot.
- 1.2.2 As restrictions eased, and in discussion with the Business Continuity Planning Group and the Health and Safety Officer, risk assessments were developed to reopen the reception areas at both Council Offices.
- 1.2.3 Portable Desk screens and personal protective equipment (PPE) was put in place to optimise the safety of any staff and visitors to reception.
- 1.2.4 Any public visiting reception had to book an appointment, with all people wishing to make an appointment screened through a series of COVID-19 health questions.
- 1.2.5 As the kiosk has been closed during lockdown and not available for members of the public to use, this had further cut down footfall to the reception areas. Ultimately there was no “drop in” footfall to receptions at all, thus ensuring safe distancing measures could be controlled and adhered to.
- 1.2.6 The only appointments that have been booked in during this time have been for “proof of life” appointments and homelessness. As a result, the Customer Service Advisors presence at the Kings Hill office was scaled back to just Monday and Fridays, to complement the times when Licensing Officers met their applicants who needed to be seen in person for security checks while processing driver badges.
- 1.2.7 The operation at Tonbridge Castle this was scaled back to a Thursday and Friday, to support one advisor who was unable to work from home. It is fair to say that advisors have been fully able to resolve enquiries from residents over the phone thereby not needing to bring them into a reception point.

## **1.3 Gateway partners**

- 1.3.1 The Interim Gateway & Customer Services Manager is in discussion with all Gateway partners to question what their proposed return to Gateway will look like. Some organisations, like Citizens Advice in North and West Kent, use mainly older people, and they do not want an immediate return to the Castle face to face service, instead, they will adopt a phased approach and have intimated, that they will move to an appointment service only moving forward and not the drop-in service they provided prior to the pandemic.
- 1.3.2 Smaller organisations who use one of the counters, or meeting room less frequently, predominantly used an appointment only model prior to lockdown.

### Summary of current Gateway Partners

Gateway Partner	Pre-Covid delivery model	New delivery model
Blue Badge Assessments	Appointment only	Appointment only
Blue Badge Application Assist	Appointment only	Appointment only
NHS stop smoking	Appointment only	Appointment only
Kent Supported Employment	Appointment only	Appointment only
Pension Wise	Appointment only	Appointment only
CAB NWK	Appointment & drop it	Phase 1 – Phone service only
CAB NWK	Appointment & drop it	Phase 2 – Appointment only
CGL	Appointment only	No information provided to date
Hi Kent	Drop in	No information provided to date
Victim Support	Drop in	No information provided to date

#### 1.4 Other authorities

- 1.4.1 As we move to leave the period of pandemic and government restrictions through the Road Map, meetings have been taking place with Kent Customer Services Managers to discuss how our services can return to our reception points and what they believed new service need will be.
- 1.4.2 Following these discussions, it is clear that they are all coming to the conclusion that the need for a drop-in face-to-face service, is potentially something more of a pre-covid model, and that residents' perceptions/requirements for support has changed during the pandemic.
- 1.4.3 This is extremely evident from the lack of appointments that have been needed by our residents in the past year to resolve their enquiries. Residents have adjusted/realised that their enquiries can be fully supported/resolved over the phone which in turn does not require them to journey out to a reception point for support but just pick up the phone from the comfort of their own home.
- 1.4.4 Within Kent, other Local Authorities, they are considering their options as the COVID-19 lockdown eases, and what interaction they intend to have with their residents, visitors and businesses.
- 1.4.5 This change in behaviour of Residents and Visitors to the Borough has helped feed into TMBC Digital Strategy, where, with new digital services more and more of the customer needs can be carried out on-line.

- 1.4.6 All authorities have embedded a more digital channel shift strategy into their Customer Services delivery model as we have ourselves. All residents who call, whilst being offered support, are also advised that they can transact themselves through our online services, including their own online Revenues & Benefits Citizens Access account where they can view their live accounts and notify of changes to their circumstances without the need to engage with the authority on a one-to-one basis. They can effectively do this 24/7 as opposed to our opening times of Monday to Friday.

## 1.5 Visitors to Council offices

Kings Hill	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
18/19	3,851	3,804	3,117	3,264	3,212	2,952	3,568	2,987	2,014	2,929	2,439	3,167
19/20	3,038	3,293	2,642	3,481	2,721	3,140	3,747	2,887	2,005	2,575	2,477	1,864

Castle	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
18/19	3,014	3,110	3,269	3,194	3,444	2,845	2,925	2,448	1,980	1,955	1,900	2,242
19/20	3,072	2,961	3,003	3,180	2,680	4,156	4,964	3,557	2,369	2,823	2,220	878

- 1.5.1 We have worked extremely hard to upskill our advisors, so that we are able to resolve 80-90% of resident's enquiries at first point of contact. This has resulted in residents having a greater assurance when they call, resulting in the fact they do not need to visit the offices, but we can action their enquiry there and then.
- 1.5.2 First point of resolution is what Customer Services are striving for with each caller.
- 1.5.3 Since the Customer Services receptions were reopened for people to be seen on an appointment basis, the number of appointments has been as follows.

w/c	July 2020	Aug 2020	Sept 2020	Oct 2020	Nov 2020	Dec 2020	Jan 2021	Feb 2021	Mar 2021	Apr 2021	Total
Customer Service Appointments	11	6	9	7	9	11	6	12	5	10	89
Licensing Appointments	30	21	24	18	13	5	5	0	0	18	134
Cemetery	7	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8

Appointments											
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1.5.4 In respect of Customer Services appointments of the 89 provided, 86 of these have been for Proof of Life. Proof of Life appointments are for resident to continue to claim their foreign pension.

1.5.5 The 3 appointments for statutory council services were as follows:

- Parking Services Enquiry – Attended as problems with their online account
- Homelessness Support – This individual did not attend for their appointment
- Revenues Enquiry – This individual did not attend for their appointment

1.5.6 This is ultimately due to Customer Services resolving the resident's enquiry without the need for an appointment to be provided. Whilst it is fair to say that as we move out of lockdown, we can enable customer services to see our more vulnerable residents. It is recommended that we control how this contact is made to enable us to use our resources in the most efficient manner.

## 1.6 Opening times

1.6.1 Should we move to appointment service model within our receptions it gives greater opportunity to align our phone and reception opening times.

1.6.2 We currently resource our phone lines from 08:30 hours to 17:00 Monday – Friday, whereas the majority of other authorities have already moved to 09:00 hours.

1.6.3 By moving the opening time of the switchboard to 9:00 hours, would allow you to focus your resource on the busiest times of the day as opposed to bringing advisors in early, when calls are very few.

1.6.4 After analysing all calls taken between 08:30 hours and 09:00 hours in the morning the following data was recorded:

Month	Total Calls Received	Calls 08:30 – 09:00	%
November 2019	17,706	766	4%
December 2019	11,243	508	5%
January 2020	15,746	549	3%
February 2020	12,923	539	4%
March 2020	14,642	606	4%

April 2020	11,145	320	3%
May 2020	10,531	339	3%
June 2020	13,277	463	3%
July 2020	14,076	418	3%

1.6.5 To support our digital agenda and ensure we can adequately resource our reception and phone services, as other authorities have done, we are proposing to align our opening / contact times, so that both reception points and our phones open at the same times to also allow our resources to focus on the busiest times of the day for resident contact.

## 1.7 Payments

1.7.1 The Council operates two kiosks (one at each site) that are used to take cash and card payments for Council Tax, Business Rates and other fees and charges made by the Council.

1.7.2 The table below gives the total amount of funds received through these kiosks for the year prior to lockdown.

Payment for	Payment by Cash			Payment by Card		
	Amount £	Individual Ref	Transactions	Amount £	Individual Ref	Transactions
Council Tax	669,147	1,063	5,779	522,286	1,025	3,207
Car Parking Penalty Charge Notices	4,273	117	118	8,220	241	243
Planning Applications	783	2	5	5,657	1	30
Invoices	13,751	73	187	12,939	80	139
Business Rates	4,518	4	5	10,702	6	8
Other income	63,543	43	896	222,237	31	2,570
<b>Totals</b>	<b>756,015</b>	<b>1,302</b>	<b>6,990</b>	<b>782,042</b>	<b>1,384</b>	<b>6,197</b>

1.7.3 Following the lockdown these transactions moved to other methods either Direct Debit, online card payments or cheques.

1.7.4 The Kiosks are currently rented on an annual basis and cost around £9,000 per annum, to this the Council is required to pay for additional items such as note and coin readers. When the Treasury issues new bank notes and coins, these are normally around £900 for both kiosks, and till rolls for receipts costing around £100 per annum.

1.7.5 In addition to this the council requires cash collection facilities to transfer the cash to the Council's banking facility, this is a weekly collection costing £37.00 per week.

- 1.7.6 This means that excluding the note readers the Kiosks cost around £11,000 per annum to operate.
- 1.7.7 Other councils in the county operate additional payment facilities for those wishing to pay cash through shop facilities, such as Paypoint and post office counters. Enquiries have been made to these providers to establish the cost of setting these up. To date, only one, Paypoint have provided the necessary information to assess the costs.
- 1.7.8 Paypoint's transactional cost to the Council is 34p per transaction and a one off set up fee of £10,000. This provides a bar code on council documentation that will be recognised by any facility (normally shops, garages etc.) who can take paypoint payments. Although initially this facility would only be offered to council taxpayers who wish to pay by cash and have no other means of payment, if the transaction levels for 2019/20 were repeated the annual running cost would be in the region of £2,500 a revenue saving of £8,500 against the current cost of operations.
- 1.7.9 The £10,000 set fee could be financed from the invest to save reserve and would create a break-even point within two years of operation.
- 1.7.10 Due the contractual arrangements with KPR the council have given notice, subject to member approved, to cease the operation of the Kiosks no later than the beginning of September 2021 as no refunds are issued for part year operations.

## **1.8 Legal Implications**

- 1.8.1 None arising from this report.

## **1.9 Financial and Value for Money Considerations**

- 1.9.1 As set out above.

## **1.10 Equality Impact Assessment**

- 1.10.1 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.

## **1.11 Policy Considerations**

- 1.11.1 Asset Management

- 1.11.2 Healthy Lifestyles

## **1.12 Recommendations**

- 1.12.1 It is **RECOMMENDED** that:

- 1.12.2 The customer services operation moves from a drop-in reception service at both the Kings Hill and Castle reception points to a triaged pre booked appointment service;
- 1.12.3 The reception and call centre opening times are changed to 09:00 hours to 17:00 hours Monday to Thursday and 09:00 hours to 16:30 hours on Friday, aligning with Tonbridge Castle, which already operate these hours;
- 1.12.4 The KPR self service kiosks are removed and the Council instead moves to a bar coded bill for those more vulnerable residents who are unable to pay through digital / phone methods

Background papers:

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Nil

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