

Forest Heath District Council

(This report is a key decision. This report has been subject to appropriate notice of publication under the Council's Access to Information Rules)

Report of the Cabinet Member for Families and Communities

CABINET

5 MARCH 2013

CAB13/071

REVIEW OF CUSTOMER ACCESS LOCATIONS ACROSS FOREST HEATH (Key Decision Reference FEB13/06)

1. Summary and reasons for recommendation(s)

- 1.1 In May 2010 the Corporate Services Committee recommended changes to the structure and delivery of Customer Service and Tourism (Report No CRP10/490X refers). At that time it was agreed to review the operation and opening hours after 12 months when sufficient monitoring information had been collated. Due to shared service discussions, this review was not undertaken in 2011.
- 1.2 Since 2010, staff have continued to collect data regarding the usage of the Brandon office, Mildenhall Bus Station and Newmarket Guineas office. It is therefore possible to review the impact of the decisions made in May 2010 and make recommendations about the future delivery of services from these locations. The changes proposed in this report complement the delivery of the Council's new customer model as outlined in Report No SSG12/027 of the Shared Services Steering Group.
- 1.3 The recommendations provide a package of changes to the provision of customer service across Forest Heath. They ensure that service demand is met, whilst identifying some savings. The level and type of customer demand will continue to be monitored. Where further opportunities arise to improve service delivery these will be reported to councillors as appropriate. For instance, there may be scope to improve customer service by exploring more co-location and joint provision with other partners.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1 It is recommended that Members agree to:

- (i) **Relocate the customer access provision in Brandon to the new Brandon Centre and find alternative uses for the existing High Street office;**
- (ii) **Change the opening hours of the customer service office at Mildenhall Bus Station from 56 hours per week (08:15 to 17:45), to 36 hours (10:00 to 16:00) to meet customer demand;**

- (iii) Identify improvements to the design of the Bus Station, including upgrading the CCTV;**
- (iv) Work with partners and the community in Mildenhall to identify future use of the Bus Station building; and**
- (v) Reduce the Saturday opening hours of the Newmarket Guineas office from 10:00 to 16:00 to 10:00 to 14:00.**

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3. How will the recommendations help us meet our strategic priorities?

3.1 Providing customer access from the most appropriate locations and at convenient times to meet demand enables the council to deliver its services in a cost effective manner. As a result, these changes support the strategic priority to be an efficient and effective council. Detailed financial and staffing information is in Exempt Appendix 1.

4. Key issues

4.1 This section provides an overview of the level of customer demand, along with details of current costs and potential improvements to service to enable Cabinet to make decisions regarding the future operation of the Brandon, Mildenhall Bus Station and Newmarket customer access locations.

4.2 Brandon

Current service provision and customer demand

4.2.1 Customer access in Brandon is currently delivered from a small office on the High Street. The office is staffed by one person and is open 09:00 to 14:00 on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. The level of demand is relatively small: 4,302 customers per year, an average of 358 per month. In addition, housing officers use a small room two days per week to meet customers. This meeting room is behind the office, accessible only via a separate entrance. Given the layout of the building, both the customer service staff and housing officer are lone working. The current costs of operating this building are £7,443 (excluding customer service staff costs).

Proposed future provision

4.2.2 Suffolk County Council is re-developing the 'Old School Building' on the Market Square, known as the Brandon Centre. The aim of this project is to provide a

number of public services from one location in the heart of the town. It is anticipated that the building will be opened in April 2013.

- 4.2.3 It is recommended that Forest Heath District Council moves its customer access provision to this new building. This co-location will provide the opportunity for customers to access a range of services, including county council, police and district. It will also provide more suitable office accommodation for staff as well as safe and fit for purpose meeting space for housing and other services.
- 4.2.4 It is proposed that the council should retain its existing level of customer service in Brandon at least in the short-term. Therefore, it is recommended that FHDC customer service staff should be available from 09:00 until 14:00 four days per week, as is the current arrangement. However, it should be noted that the building will remain open for longer hours so customers will be able to use public computers, for instance to use Home-Link to bid for properties, and access other leaflets and information, such as tourist brochures. Access to other public sector services, such as the library and Children's Centre will be open for longer hours.
- 4.2.5 Forest Heath is expected to contribute financially to the management of the building. Discussions are ongoing with Suffolk County Council staff to agree the annual cost. However, officers anticipate that the ongoing contribution should be £7,000 per annum which is the same as the running costs of the existing building. This also includes the council's contribution to the public toilets which will be located in the building. The customer service staff costs will remain the same, however, there will be a saving in terms of cleaning of the existing Brandon office.
- 4.2.6 Moving the customer service provision to the Brandon Centre will result in the existing office becoming vacant. There is, therefore, an impact on the town with a vacancy on the High Street. The Property Team is already exploring alternative uses of the current office, the first floor of which is leased to a housing association with a sitting tenant. The future use of the High Street property will need to be considered as part of the council's wider review of assets. It is likely that the property will either be re-let or sold if a suitable tenant for the property does not come forward. In the meantime, until an alternative use for this building is found, the council would retain the annual liability of £4,114.

4.3 Mildenhall Bus Station

Current service provision and customer demand

- 4.3.1 The council's customer facility at Mildenhall Bus Station is currently staffed 56 hours per week with the opening hours being 08:15 to 17:45 Monday to Saturday. There is a one hour closure for lunch on a Saturday, but during the week there is no lunchtime closing. It requires a 1.51 FTE, before taking into account cover for holidays and sickness. Two members of staff work in the Bus Station and both are on temporary contracts until the end of September 2013. Only one member of staff is on duty at any time. The staff's role is to provide customer support for Forest Heath services.

- 4.3.2 Monitoring shows that 95% of customer queries relate not to Forest heath issues but to bus timetables and tickets. The remaining 5% relates to tourist information and is mainly in the summer months. Unlike the customer access points in Brandon and Newmarket, there is no demand for other council related contacts. This is due to the fact that the council's main customer access point is also located in Mildenhall and all council business is delivered from College Heath Road. Whilst there is a large area provided for tourist information in the bus station, there is very limited demand so the area is closed. In addition, the building design means that when this area is open it still does not allow customers to browse on their own, as information is displayed and stored behind a low counter. There is no fixed heating in the building so in winter it is cold, there is also a staff safety issue as the low counter affords limited protection.
- 4.3.3 The initial plans for the building did not include a staff presence and the office area was a later addition to the design. As a consequence, the office area and facilities available to staff do not provide suitable working conditions. For example, there is no separate toilet so staff have to leave the office and use the public toilets. The inadequate heating in the building, including in the small office area, means that staff have to use inefficient portable fan heating. There is no heating in the public area for customers.
- 4.3.4 Analysis of footfall shows that demand is relatively consistent across Monday to Saturday, with Saturdays receiving approximately 72% of the footfall of a weekday. However, there is a significant drop in footfall on all days after 16:00, and even more significantly after 17:00 when there is less than one customer per day on average. In the winter months, customer demand after 17:00 falls to as low as one person per week. The footfall statistics for 2011/12, by number and percentage, are detailed in the tables below. Figures collated for the current year show the same patterns. As stated above, 95% of this footfall relates to bus timetables and ticket queries. The bus station itself is frequently used by five bus companies, eight companies more infrequently and three National Express service routes. It is not possible to estimate the number of passengers who depart or alight at this the bus station, nor what percentage of these passengers use the bus station facilities. However it is estimated that there are 569 local buses using the bus stations during the week. In addition, there are two National Express services which stop at the bus station throughout the day and night.

Bus Station Footfall: number of customers and times of visits

Month	Total	08:15 to 10:00	10:00 to 16:00	16:00 to 17:00	17:00 to 17:45	Working Days	Average Customers
Apr-11	730	191	465	56	18	23	32
May-11	869	167	624	64	14	24	36
Jun-11	1372	242	931	169	30	26	53
Jul-11	1319	252	895	143	29	26	51
Aug-11	1189	238	790	131	30	26	46
Sep-11	1102	109	936	42	15	25	44
Oct-11	1092	124	860	92	16	26	42
Nov-11	992	153	756	68	15	26	38
Dec-11	811	154	582	63	12	26	31
Jan-12	625	101	489	29	6	25	25
Feb-12	568	152	361	51	4	25	23
Mar-12	995	162	739	89	5	27	37
Total	11664	2045	8428	997	194	305	457
Average	972	170	702	83	16	25	38

Percentages

Month	Percentage	08:15 to 10:00	10:00 to 16:00	16:00 to 17:00	17:00 to 17:45	16:00 to 17:45	Working Days
Apr-11	100%	26.16%	63.70%	7.67%	2.47%	10.14%	23
May-11	100%	19.22%	71.81%	7.36%	1.61%	8.98%	24
Jun-11	100%	17.64%	67.86%	12.32%	2.19%	14.50%	26
Jul-11	100%	19.11%	67.85%	10.84%	2.20%	13.04%	26
Aug-11	100%	20.02%	66.44%	11.02%	2.52%	13.54%	26
Sep-11	100%	9.89%	84.94%	3.81%	1.36%	5.17%	25
Oct-11	100%	11.36%	78.75%	8.42%	1.47%	9.89%	26
Nov-11	100%	15.42%	76.21%	6.85%	1.51%	8.37%	26
Dec-11	100%	18.99%	71.76%	7.77%	1.48%	9.25%	26
Jan-12	100%	16.16%	78.24%	4.64%	0.96%	5.60%	25
Feb-12	100%	26.76%	63.56%	8.98%	0.70%	9.68%	25
Mar-12	100%	16.28%	74.27%	8.94%	0.50%	9.45%	27
Average	100%	18.08%	72.12%	8.22%	1.58%	9.80%	

Proposed future provision

4.3.5 The bus station building is an important facility insofar as it provides somewhere for passengers to wait, access to basic travel information and use of the toilet. However, given the level of demand and type of enquiries it handles (i.e. non-council service related), it is proposed that the Bus Station should in future be staffed for six hours between 10:00 and 16:00. Outside of these hours, the building will remain open to enable a place of shelter and use of public toilets from 07:00 to 17:00/17:30. The bus station is well used but it is not felt that the absence of a staff early morning or late evening would have an adverse impact on bus user numbers and it would continue to serve its primary purpose.

- 4.3.6 Access to bus information will be maintained, with all timetables displayed in and around the bus station. Tickets for local routes can be purchased on board from drivers for all local services. In addition, National Express tickets are available through a variety of means including:
- from the bus driver
 - from local travel agents
 - Tickets and Tours, RAF Mildenhall
 - by phone
 - online
- 4.3.7 Income from National Express tickets is approximately £500 per month (£6,000 per annum). A reduction in office opening hours may reduce the income from National Express tickets, however this will be offset by a reduction in costs.
- 4.3.8 In addition, the council had a funding agreement with the Mildenhall Parish Council by way of a contribution to the provision of tourist information. The Parish's contribution amounted to £3,500 per annum for three years subject to a review after two years (paper COM08/079X). It is unclear what review, if any, was carried out after two years. Alternative, more appropriate, locations for tourist information provision in Mildenhall should be sought and this may inform discussions about the wider public sector estate in the town. This will be important to resolve before the completion of the Museum project, with its anticipated increase in visitors.
- 4.3.9 As well as acting as an information point for bus-related queries, staff also (i) monitor the use of the public toilets located inside the bus station, albeit they are not in direct line of sight; (ii) replenish the drinks vending machines; and (iii) lock the building (currently at 17:45). Alternative arrangements will be made to close the building in the evening at 17:00.
- 4.3.10 The reduction in hours will not change the lone working arrangements but staffing between core hours of 10:00 and 16:00 will enable frequent checks to be carried out Monday to Saturday. The CCTV coverage and monitoring also needs to be upgraded and an audit undertaken to ensure that its design can be improved to reduce the likelihood of anti-social behaviour. This should be done in conjunction with Police and community safety colleagues.
- 4.3.11 It is recommended that the way the Bus Station building is operated should be kept under review, including involving partners and the Mildenhall community.

4.4 Newmarket Guineas office

Current service provision and customer demand

- 4.4.1 The Newmarket Guineas office is open six days per week, Monday to Saturday. Opening hours Monday to Thursday are 09:00 to 17:00 and Friday 09:00 to 16:30. On a Saturday, the office is open from 10:00 until 16:00. As part of the customer service restructure in 2010 it was suggested that there might be merit in reviewing the Saturday opening hours and/or the introduction of seasonal opening. It was therefore proposed that the level of usage be

monitored and a further review carried out after 12 months (paper CRP10/490X refers). Since then, the type and level of service demand in the Newmarket offices has been monitored.

4.4.2 The tables below show the level of demand in 2011/12 for weekdays and Saturdays. Footfall statistics collated in 2012/13 shows similar patterns. The type of enquiry varies between a weekday and a Saturday. In general terms, customer enquiries on a weekday are more complicated and require a more lengthy discussion, for example, council tax and benefits queries. In contrast, the type of demand on a Saturday is less involved and requires a quicker response, for example dropping off paperwork. It is felt that approximately 20% of queries relate to tourism, the remaining 80% of demand relates to other council services such as benefits, housing and council tax.

4.4.3 It had been anticipated that there would be a seasonal variation in the number of customers with a higher number of visitors in the summer months compared to winter. However, as can be seen from the figures this is not the case and there is little difference in the number of visitors throughout the year. Across the year, the number of visitors on a Saturday reduces after 14:00. In the summer months, 79% of visits are made before 14:00 and in winter this increases to 82%.

	Weekdays 2011/12				Saturday 2011/12			
	Total visits Mon-Fri	Working Weekdays	Av. per Weekday	Av. Per hour	Total visits Sat.	Saturdays	Av per Sat.	Av. Per hour
				(open 8 hours)				(open 6 hours)
April	2,106	18	117	14.6	132	5	26	4.4
May	1,906	20	95	11.9	97	4	24	4.0
June	1,422	22	65	8.1	64	4	16	2.7
July	1,974	23	86	10.7	108	5	22	3.6
August	1,922	22	87	10.9	112	4	28	4.7
September	1,927	22	88	10.9	100	4	25	4.2
October	2,105	21	100	12.5	103	5	21	3.4
November	2,029	22	92	11.5	100	4	25	4.2
December	1,339	17	79	9.8	84	4	21	3.5
January	2,118	21	101	12.6	107	4	27	4.5
February	1,974	21	94	11.8	116	4	29	4.8
March	2,390	22	109	13.6	127	5	25	4.2

Proposed future provision

4.4.4 Based on the above figures, it is suggested that the Monday to Friday opening times remain unchanged. It is also recommended that on a Saturday, the office is closed at 14:00. Closing the office two hours earlier will result in a saving of £2,743.52, with little or no impact on service provision. The financial

implications of this recommendation are detailed in the exempt appendix to this report.

- 4.4.5 Whilst the office does provide space for the display of tourism literature, it is felt that improvements to the service could be made. For instance, there may be scope to discuss alternative locations, such as sites more likely to attract tourists. The council should keep an open dialogue with other partners in Newmarket as to the future location of tourist information.

5. Other options considered

Brandon

- 5.1 Customer access in Brandon could be retained in its current location. However, customers and the council would not benefit from the opportunities which can arise from co-location with other services.

Mildenhall Bus Station

- 5.2 One option is to remove staff entirely from the Bus Station as there is no demand for the council's core services and bus timetabling and ticket information is provided elsewhere. This would result in a saving of £28,170, taking into account the loss of income from National Express and the Parish Council. However, the council's property team believe that removing a staff presence altogether could result in higher maintenance and insurance costs, estimated at £17,320 (from current costs of £8,660) due to a potential likely increase in anti-social behaviour. This is not, therefore, considered to be a viable option at this time but could be reviewed in the future following improvements to the building design and CCTV.

Newmarket Guineas office

- 5.3 There are a number of alternative options for the Guineas office. Including: (i) close early on a Saturday in the winter, however, as noted in the figures in section four, there is little difference between summer and winter demand; and (ii) do not open at all on Saturday. These alternative options should be considered in the future following a more detailed consideration of tourist information provision in the town.

6. Community impact

6.1 Crime and disorder impact *(including Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998)*

- 6.1.1 The recommendations relating to Brandon remove the issue of staff lone working.

- 6.1.2 There are some anti-social behaviour issues to be resolved at the Mildenhall Bus Station and toilets which occur even when the building is staffed. The council will seek the advice of the Suffolk Constabulary Crime Reduction Officer about how to minimise any damage and liaise with the Safer Neighbourhood Team. An upgrade to the CCTV coverage and monitoring is also necessary.

6.2 Diversity and equality impact *(including the findings of the Equality Impact Assessment)*

6.2.1 The council is committed to ensuring that it delivers services in a fair and equitable manner. These changes will not have a negative impact on customers as alternative methods of accessing information are available.

6.3 Sustainability impact *(including completing a Sustainability Impact Assessment)*

6.3.1 There are no significant sustainability issues, although there will be some benefits in terms of a reduction in heating and other running costs.

6.4 Other impact *(any other impacts affecting this report)*

6.4.1 None identified.

7. Consultation *(what consultation has been undertaken, and what were the outcomes?)*

7.1 Consultation has been carried out with staff employed at each site to ensure there is full understanding of the customer service demand and further consultation will be carried out about changes to working hours. Consultation with the Portfolio Holder has also been undertaken. Input has also been sought from the Head of Waste Management and Property Services to ensure that all property issues are considered. In addition, the views of the Head of Economic Development and Growth have been taken into account for a strategic overview of tourism. Consultation has also been undertaken with the Council’s Community Safety Officer and Health and Safety Manager.

8. Risk/opportunity assessment *(potential hazards or opportunities affecting corporate, service or project objectives)*

Risk area	Inherent level of risk (before controls)	Controls	Residual risk (after controls)
Customer access provision does not meet customers’ changing expectations	High	Ensure the council offers services that are easy to access at a time that is convenient through implementation of customer access strategy	Low
Council fails to identify opportunities for delivering co-ordinated access with other partners	Medium	Work closely with partners to identify opportunities for shared public access	Low

9. Legal and policy implications

9.1 There are no legal and policy implications. The proposed changes complement the council’s draft Customer Access Strategy.

10. Ward(s) affected

10.1 All

11. Background papers

- 11.1 Report No SSG12/027 of the Shared Services Steering Group.
Exempt Report No CRP10/490X of the Corporate Services Committee

12. Documents attached

- 12.1 Appendix 1 – Financial and Resource Implications (***Exempt under Paragraph 1)***