

Public access to West Suffolk Council offices

Report number:	CAB/WS/21/026	
Report to and date:	Cabinet	29 June 2021
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Decisions Plan: The decision made as a result of this report will usually be published within 48 hours and cannot be actioned until five clear working days of the publication of the decision have elapsed. This item is included on the Decisions Plan.

Wards impacted: All

Recommendation: It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 1. Notes, as set out in the Council's Customer Access Strategy, the continued prioritisation of online and telephone customer support to improve customer service.**
- 2. Notes the type and level of contact managed by the Customer Service team and the impact of COVID 19 on customer access.**
- 3. Agrees that, if face to face customer contact is necessary, it is appointment only.**

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- 4. Agrees the following changes to the Council's buildings and customer access, noting this formalises a number of arrangements that have been in place since March 2020 due to COVID restrictions:**
- a. Haverhill Office – Office to remain open for pre-booked appointments with no Council reception service. Public access to Council services provided by a phone and computers on site.**
 - b. Newmarket Guineas – Office to remain closed to the public and used only as an office base for car park staff. The future use of the office will be kept under review and subject to further consideration.**
 - c. Mildenhall Hub - Public access to Council services provided by a phone and computers on site or through a pre-booked appointment. A Hub Host service provided on site covering all co-located partner services.**
 - d. Mildenhall bus station – Building to remain open as a place of shelter and access to public toilets. No Council reception services provided.**
 - e. West Suffolk House – Building to reopen with reception staff to provide a visitor management service (for access to meetings for the Council and building tenants). Public access to Council services provided by a phone and computers on site or via pre-arranged appointment.**
 - f. West Suffolk Operational Hub, Council depot – Reception to remain open to support pre-booked workshop business and for appointment only visitor management.**
 - g. Car park office, Bury St Edmunds - No public access to be available from this site. All services to be provided online or via telephone.**

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- 5. Notes the financial impacts as set out in paragraph 6.1 of Report number: CAB/WS/21/026 and approves funding for the one-off costs from the Council's Invest to Save reserve.**

1. Context to this report

- 1.1 For a number of years as part of its programme of transformation and customer service improvement, the Council has expanded and invested in its online access to services, with the focus being to enable public access online 24/7. This has been supported by the Customer Contact Centre so that assistance can be provided over the telephone to those who are unable to access online services. As a result, over the past few years customer access has changed with a reduction in face to face and telephone contact, to online contact. As an example, from 2018-2019 to 2020-2021 there was an 86 per cent increase in website unique page views and a 68 per cent decrease in the number of calls to the Customer Contact Centre. See Appendix A for further information. The Council's approach to customer service is set out in its Customer Access Strategy [West Suffolk Council Customer Access Strategy 2019 - 2022](#).
- 1.2 Prior to March 2020, the Council provided a number of public access sites across the district which enabled customers to drop in and speak to customer service staff. Over the years, staff have supported customers to move online and, as a result, the number of customers visiting these sites has reduced. As an example, between 2018 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020 the number of face-to-face customers across West Suffolk Council sites decreased by 22 per cent (see Appendix A). Staff at these sites have increasingly moved from providing reactive face to face services, to encouraging customers to use online services. Customer online activity is supported by the team in the Customer Contact Centre, who also manage administrative work for Council services, for example, processing applications. In addition, throughout the past year, the Council has increased its direct and targeted contact with customers either over the phone or by email, particularly those who are vulnerable and businesses during COVID. As a result, our proactive contact with customers has increased, as opposed to waiting for customers to contact the Council and reacting accordingly. This has, in the main, been a positive impact on the dynamic between the Council and its customers, confirming a change in customer behaviour since lockdown.
- 1.3 Since March 2020, the Council has provided all its customer services either online, over the telephone or through video conferencing. All Council services can be provided without the need for customers to visit Council offices, with the exception of a very small number of verification or licensing tasks. If a face-to-face contact in an office is required, an appointment can be arranged. The offices in Haverhill and Mildenhall have been open to the public for pre-arranged appointments since March 2020, with drop-in access limited to Jobcentre (DWP) services.
- 1.4 Given the experience of the past 15 months, the already significant shift in customer contact to online and telephone, and the need to continue to reduce unnecessary in person contact in light of COVID, the Council has reviewed its approach to public access. This report sets out the findings of this review. It concludes that the focus should remain on improving

online and telephone services, and as such a number of recommendations are made in relation to each of its public access or office buildings. Access to leisure and cultural venues, such as museums and the Apex, remain unaffected as does access to public meetings.

2. **Proposals within this report**

Overview of changes to public access

- 2.1 The Council monitors how people access its services. The past few years has seen a steady increase in the number of services provided online alongside a reduction in the need for customers to visit the Council offices. However, it is recognised that some customers may not have online access or may prefer to speak to a member of staff. The Customer Contact Centre therefore provides support to customers to access a range of services at the first point of contact. Increased online services, supplemented with telephone support if needed remains the priority for the Council. Table one at Appendix A shows how the different types of customer contact have changed over the past three years.
- 2.2 Despite the closure of the Council offices to the public since March 2020, satisfaction with the customer service offer has remained high (see table three at Appendix A). All customer transactions have been supported either online, over the telephone or using video conferencing.
- 2.3 Based on the experience of the past 15 months, it is proposed that the Council makes changes to its customer service provision at each of its offices. These changes have been in place since March 2020 with the recommendation being to continue with these arrangements following the proposed removal of COVID restrictions from June 2021 onwards (or date agreed in line with government guidance).
- 2.4 In making these recommendations, the Council has considered the customer access data prior to and during COVID. It has also sought the views of partner organisations, including those who share the buildings, and with representatives of disability organisations. The findings of our engagement with other stakeholders, supplemented by an equality impact assessment, are set out in section four of this report.
- 2.5 A number of factors have been considered when making recommendations about the future of customer access, including: (i) digital exclusion; (ii) impact on customers, particularly those who are vulnerable; (iii) any detrimental impact on other organisations; (iv) security of visitors and staff on each site; and (v) financial impact (section 6.1 of this report).
- 2.6 The recommendations **do not change** the arrangements to the following: provision of 24/7 online access; customer contact phone support Monday

to Friday, 8:45am to 5pm; and pre-arranged appointments with staff. Staff will continue to meet with customers in various locations across the district as part of their role, for example, Building Control; Housing; Environmental Health; Planning and Conservation and so on. Furthermore, it is not proposed to make any changes to the democratic process with access to meetings (either in person or online) being unaffected.

2.7 The introduction of appointment only services where a face-to-face meeting is required means the most appropriate member of staff is available and the customer will have been advised of what information or paperwork is needed to ensure that the meeting is productive. This reduces any wasted customer time and/or journeys.

2.8 ***Haverhill Offices – Lower Downs Slade***

Since July 2020, the office has been open to the public to provide limited access to the Jobcentre. The proposal is to offer access to Council services from the building over the telephone or the use of the public access computers. The area of the building which was previously used by Council customer service staff has remained unstaffed for over a year. The onsite presence has been provided by Jobcentre staff and security.

2.9 It is suggested that this situation continues even following the removal of COVID restrictions with no drop-in service for Council services provided from this building. It should be noted that the number of Council customers visiting this site has reduced over the years with an 18 per cent fall in the number of customers between 2018 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020.

2.10 Council staff will continue to use the office as a touchdown point to work. Furthermore, staff can continue to make arrangements to meet customers for appointments in the office should this be required. Facilities Management staff will make use of the former customer service desks in the reception area.

2.11 Existing tenants of the building (Jobcentre, Citizens Advice and Suffolk County Council) have been consulted on the Council's proposed recommendation and have not raised any operational concerns. Minor changes will need to be made to the Facilities Management contract to ensure that the telephone and public access computers are operational and cleaned in line with health and safety advice. There may also be a small cost to modifying Council signs in the building.

2.12 ***Newmarket Guineas office***

Prior to March 2020, this office was staffed by the Customer Service Team with more than one person being on duty at any one time due to security concerns and layout of the building, not due to the number of

visitors. Visitors to this office have reduced over the years with the majority of customer queries relating to council tax (26 per cent of transactions in 2019 to 2020). Between 2018 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020 the total number of customer visits to the office reduced by 24 per cent.

- 2.13 This office has remained closed to public access since March 2020. The Council's car park team have continued to use the building for office space and it is also a store for emergency planning.
- 2.14 It is recommended that this office remains closed to the public following the ending of Covid restrictions. All Council services can be provided online or over the telephone.
- 2.15 The office was also the location for the Suffolk County Council Registrar and this part-time service will be relocated to an alternative venue.
- 2.16 It is recommended that the office continues to be used by the car park service until alternatives can be identified. There will be an immediate reduction in the cost of Facilities Management cleaning on site. There is a small cost to modifying the signs from the outside of the building and to instal window freezes to improve its appearance.
- 2.17 We will review options on the lease in consultation with the landlord, which could include the potential to surrender, sublet or assign the lease. In the case of the surrender or reassignment of the premises, the parking team would need to relocate either to alternative commercial space or other Council premises.
- 2.18 ***Mildenhall Hub***
- Since March 2020, the College Heath Road office has been open to the public to provide limited access to the Jobcentre on an appointment only basis for its most vulnerable customers. The area of the building which was previously used by the Council customer services team has remained unstaffed. The onsite presence has been provided by Jobcentre staff and security. In June 2021, these arrangements were transferred to the Mildenhall Hub.
- 2.19 It is suggested that this arrangement continues even following the removal of COVID restrictions. Public access to Council services will be by telephone or public access PCs in the library area, or pre-arranged appointment. It should be noted that the number of Council customers visiting the former College Heath Road site has reduced over the years with a 20 per cent reduction of visitors between 2018 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020.
- 2.20 Staff can make arrangements to meet customers for appointments in the Hub should this be required.

2.21 The Council contributes towards the cost of the security on site, in addition to the security already in place provided by the Jobcentre. A phone to access Council services and public access computers provided by the library will be available on site.

2.22 In addition, partners such as Abbeycroft and the Library service are providing a 'Hub Host' service on site and are aware of how to signpost customers to Council services.

2.23 ***Mildenhall Bus Station***

It is recommended that the Council continues with the current arrangements of the building remaining open only for shelter and public toilets. No customer service staff will be onsite.

2.24 The number of visitors to the building in the years prior to 2020 had reduced and the majority of customer contact related to bus services, which is not a Council function and information is available online. The number of customers visiting the access point at this site reduced by 11 per cent between 2018 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020 following a number of years of continual decline in footfall. Footfall is not recorded for people using the site for access to the public toilet and for shelter.

2.25 Vandalism and anti-social behaviour on this site has been problematic for a number of years and has increased in the absence of a staff presence (albeit staff were not employed to act as security). Modifications have been made to this building to limit access to the toilets only (see section 6.1 below) and CCTV is in operation. However, the design of this building is not conducive to eliminating entirely antisocial behaviour. We are keen to explore future sustainable uses of the site.

2.26 ***West Suffolk House, Bury St Edmunds***

West Suffolk House has remained closed to the public since March 2020 with access only to staff of building tenants. Over the years the number of customers visiting West Suffolk House to access services has fallen. Between 2018 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020 the number of customers visiting this site reduced by 25 per cent (this excludes visitors for pre-arranged meetings and to access democratic meetings). However, the site is used by all partners in the building for meetings and pre-arranged appointments. Therefore, visitor management activity remained high in comparison with the other sites with a reception team providing visitor management services to all building tenants. The visitor management function is part funded by Suffolk County Council.

2.27 Whilst the Council and other partners in the building will be considering post-COVID arrangements for office-based staff and meeting access in offices, it is likely that there will remain a requirement for some face-to-

face meetings. As such, a visitor management service will be necessary at this building.

2.28 It is therefore recommended that, from June 2021 (or the date agreed in line with government public health guidance) that the office is re-opened only for pre-arranged meetings and bookings. Customer Service staff will no longer be available on site to manage drop-in enquires. Customer Service staff will only be on site to support visitor management functions. Customers without their own telephone or computer will be able to access both onsite (similar to the arrangements in Haverhill and Mildenhall).

2.29 To support the visitor management service provided by the Customer Service team, Facilities Management will be on site and arrangements in place to manage the transition to appointment only services. Access to any democratic meetings will not be affected with public access to meetings, either virtually or in person, remaining open.

2.30 ***West Suffolk Operational Hub – Council depot***

The reception at this facility is to remain open to support the pre-booked workshop business (MOTs, taxi testing, tachometer testing, brake roller testing, goods inwards) but also to support appointment only visitor management. This is not a walk-up facility that is open to the general public and visitors will remain appointment only.

2.31 ***Car park office, Bury St Edmunds***

Prior to March 2020, there were occasional visitors to the car park office in Bury St Edmunds, specifically for contractors to collect on-street parking permits and to deal with any day-to-day parking issues raised by the public. It is recommended that this office remains closed to the public following the removal of COVID restrictions. Since the implementation of Civil Parking Enforcement, all services provided by the car parks team are available online or over the telephone.

2.32 ***Communicating the changes***

It will be important to communicate the changes outlined above and to ensure that customers are signposted and supported to access services. Key partners will also be informed so that there is no negative impact on either their own customers or any increased demand from the Council's customers. A full communication plan has been prepared to ensure a smooth a transition as possible.

3. Alternative options that have been considered

3.1 The Council could reintroduce the arrangements that were in place prior to March 2020 at some or all of these sites. However, this would not

capture the benefits of the significant change in customer access and behaviour which have resulted as a consequence of COVID restrictions (and were emerging before the restrictions). More services are available online or over the telephone which is accessible, regardless of where customers live and a time which is convenient. Assistance is available to those who are unable to use online services. This continues the Council's approach to transformation and the improvement in customer services which has been in place for a number of years and as set out in its Customer Access Strategy.

- 3.2 The Council could have closed all offices to customer access, however, the buildings which are recommended to remain open are shared spaces and used by other organisations.

4. Consultation and engagement undertaken

- 4.1 Consultation and engagement has been carried out with a range of partner organisations, including those based in the Council buildings and those representing disability groups, and with some Council staff. The basis of this initial engagement was to understand the impact of these recommendations with the aim of understanding the following:

1. What are the implications of these recommendations?
2. What would be the implications for customers of these recommendations? Where might the customer demand, pre-COVID, be diverted to?
3. From a customers' perspective, what would be the equalities implications (if any) of continuing with the current alternative arrangements?

- 4.2 The Council has detailed information about the number of people accessing different services and through which channel, for example, online, in person or over the telephone. Based on this understanding of customer access Council Service Managers have been consulted to identify any risks or mitigations with customers accessing services in light of the recommendations in this report. Any concerns or risks were identified, with mitigations so that customers can be supported appropriately.

- 4.3 Consultation has also been carried out with a number of partner organisations. Some of the partners are based in the Council offices and others are based elsewhere but may either signpost to council services or support customers. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Citizens Advice and Suffolk County Council have all indicated that the changes they had to make to their own service provision during the previous 15 months were in line with Council services. As a result, there were no operational concerns raised about our proposals. In terms of the co-location of partners at Mildenhall Hub, the concept of the Hub Host

model had been discussed prior to COVID-19 and replaces the 'traditional reception' for those points of first contact with customers.

- 4.4 During the development of these recommendations, views were sought from disability groups and those supporting vulnerable customers. This was to ensure that those who have particular needs are not negatively impacted by the recommendations and not excluded from services. Representatives from the groups indicated that their experience had been similar to the Council's in that online platforms and digital services had been a success for them and their customers. Each group intends to continue this offer beyond any easing of COVID restrictions. The main priority for each group was to ensure that the telephone support remained available alongside the online offer. The issues identified as part of this engagement are included in the risk section of this report (section five and Appendix B) and in the Equality Impact Assessment (section 6.4 below and Appendix C).
- 4.5 Conversations with other councils in Suffolk indicates that each is considering its customer services offer with the focus being online and telephone support.

5. Risks associated with the proposals

- 5.1 A detailed risk assessment has been undertaken and considered alongside the Equality Impact Assessment. The risk assessment, including mitigations is included in Appendix B.
- 5.2 The key elements of risk relate to the need to ensure that customers can still easily access Council services. In many cases the risk can be mitigated by ensuring that there is a robust communication plan which ensures that individuals are aware of how to access Council services. This includes targeted communication so that it reaches specific groups who may be vulnerable and/or have a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

6. Implications arising from the proposals

6.1 Financial

The identified costs and savings associated with the recommendations is set out below:

One-off Costs	
Removal of signs – Haverhill, Newmarket and Mildenhall Bus Station	£1,000
Window freezes – Newmarket	£300
Building modifications – Mildenhall Bus Station	£3,500

Additional FM costs - new signs, removal of desks/storage, general decommissioning costs	£5,000
Alterations to reception area (West Suffolk House if needed) – sockets, furniture	£3,000
One off cost of change – redundancy (estimated cost)	£120,000
Total one-off costs	£132,800

On-going savings	
Reduction in Facilities Management costs – Newmarket	£5,000
Staffing (recurring)	£90,000
Total on-going savings	£95,000

Year one net costs	£37,800
Year two net saving	£57,200
Annual savings from year 3 onwards	£95,000

One-off costs would total £132,800, this would be funded from the invest-to-save reserve. On-going savings would total £95,000 per year, giving a payback time of the original costs in one year five months.

- 6.2 Legal compliance – There are no legal implications to these recommendations. Access to services remains, as does public access to the democratic process. Targeted communication and support given to those with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.
- 6.3 Personal data processing – There are no implications.
- 6.4 Equalities – A full Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) is attached as Appendix C. This identified a number of key actions which need to be undertaken to address the impact of this decision. This action plan is set out on page 11 and 12 of Appendix C and will be implemented following consideration of this proposal by Cabinet.
- 6.5 Crime and disorder – A security and/or Facilities Management staff member(s) remains on site in office buildings which are open to the public. CCTV remains in place as appropriate. As stated above, the Mildenhall Bus Station is a target for anti-social behaviour and mitigations

have been put in place, such as CCTV. This is being monitored and further action considered if necessary.

- 6.6 Environment or sustainability – As part of the Council’s Climate Action Plan agreed in July 2020, the Council committed to continue to explore opportunities to reduce the impact on the environment by reducing vehicle and transport related greenhouse gas emissions. Whilst that related to the Council’s own fleet, it is working with public sector colleagues across Suffolk to look at further opportunities to support the wider journey to a carbon neutral Suffolk. 37 per cent of CO2 emissions in Suffolk in 2017 came from transport and achieving carbon neutrality by 2030 will require significant action across a range of stakeholders in Suffolk (source: [Suffolk Climate Emergency Plan, Technical Report \(greensuffolk.org\)](https://www.greensuffolk.org)). This is one way we can support that ambition with the promotion of reduce need to commute, fewer journeys for face-to-face meetings, and more accessible services online.
- 6.7 HR or staffing – The recommendations if approved will result in a reduction in staff of approximately five full time equivalent. A formal process of staff engagement and consultation is being undertaken.
- 6.8 Changes to existing policies – no changes as the recommendations support the continued delivery of the Council’s Customer Access Strategy.
- 6.9 External organisations (such as businesses, community groups)
This matter is addressed in section four above.

7. Appendices referenced in this report

- 7.1 Appendix A: Customer access data
- 7.2 Appendix B: Risk register
- 7.3 Appendix C: Equality Impact Assessment

8. Background documents associated with this report

- 8.1 Recommendations of the St Edmundsbury and Forest Heath Overview and Scrutiny Committees: 9 and 10 January 2019 – Customer Access Strategy 2019-2022 Report No: EXC/SA/19/008 Report to and date: Shadow Executive (Cabinet) 5 February 201
[Forest Heath District Council \(westsuffolk.gov.uk\)](https://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk)