

**REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR - CUSTOMERS AND HUMAN RESOURCES****CUSTOMER SERVICES CENTRE****Purpose of the Report**

1. To seek Members' agreement to:
  - Changes to the Customer Service Centre opening times in line with those of the MASH and other Council services and other Councils across Nottinghamshire and more widely.
  - Moving the main switchboard line (01159 823823) to a non-geographic number with calls diverted to, and answered by, staff at the Customer Service Centre.

**Background Information**

2. The Customer Service Centre (CSC) is based in Mercury House at Annesley and deals with between 650,000 to 700,000 enquiries a year via the telephone, on line (web chat etc), email and SMS text messaging.
3. The Customer Service Centre's current opening times are from 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday and Saturday mornings from 8.00am to 12.00pm. The team work on a shift pattern, one of which is 'lates' and another includes "weekends". There are 4 staff members covering the late shift and 5 at weekends which includes a Senior Advisor who manages the team during this time, ensures the building is locked and secure and is on hand to manage questions, customer issues or escalated calls.
4. Through its Customer Access Strategy and Digital First Programme the Council is trying to enable channel shift and encourage more customers to choose to self-serve using the Council's website to contact and transact with the Council. This means that customers can interact with the Council when they want (24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year) using the tools they want to use.

**Opening Times**

5. Feedback from customers is that they are not expecting the telephone service to be available after 'normal office hours' or at weekends and, as such, there is little demand after 5.30pm or at weekends. Each night, on average, the centre receives 15 calls across a two and a half hour period (less than 0.5% of the total calls received each day) and on Saturday mornings approximately 100 non urgent calls.
6. However, demand continues to increase during office hours as more services are delivered through the Customer Service Centre acting as the Council's front door and as increasingly complex activities are undertaken which take longer to resolve. For example, adult social care

telephone assessments.

7. Reductions in staffing over a number of years to deliver savings and reduce costs has resulted in resource pressures during peak times and to cover lunch and break times during the day. Over the last year this has begun to impact on call waiting times during peak periods. Changing the operating hours of the Centre would result in more efficient and effective use of staffing resources during these peak periods and more generally.
8. Recruitment of staff continues to be a challenge experienced in many call centre environments with the need for shift working resulting in fewer quality applications for roles, both internally and externally. Late shifts and weekend working also has a negative impact on applications from people with children, as child care is often harder to find or more expensive during the evening and at weekends.
9. The Customer Service Centre acts as a 'training pool' for staff and continues to lose staff members to internally advertised posts within areas of interest, particularly those that offer more flexible working conditions or a 9am - 5pm working day. Whilst this is beneficial for front line services such as Adult Social Care and potentially the Council more widely it does compound the resourcing issues at the Customer Service Centre. Changing the opening hours may help improve retention of trained and experienced staff for longer at the Customer Service Centre and reduce staff attrition. Staff have been canvassed and would very much welcome a change to opening hours of 8am to 6.00pm Monday to Friday.
10. The proposed change will have no negative affect to the support provided to departments as most operate from 8am-5pm, 4.30pm on Fridays, so enquiries cannot be transferred or escalated to departments outside normal "office hours" anyway. Emergency and out of hours situations will continue to be covered by the Emergency Duty Team (for social care) and the Highways Emergency line (for traffic and highways emergencies).
11. Management time in maintaining rotas and ensuring shifts are covered would be reduced if shift working were removed freeing up more time for staff training and development and continuous improvement.

## **Benchmarking Information**

12. Analysis has been completed to benchmark this Council's opening times alongside Nottinghamshire District Councils; County and other UK District Councils.
13. Some key findings are:
  - 81% of all Councils' Customer Service Centres are open from 8am to 6pm or less.
  - 89% of the Councils in Nottinghamshire are open 8am to 6pm or less.
  - Almost 70% of Councils contacted across the country are not available on Saturdays.
  - Only 6 Councils (including Nottinghamshire County Council) out of 59 surveyed opened from 8am to 8pm.
14. Councils were also asked to provide information about the response from customers when reducing opening hours. Feedback from other Councils included:

"We changed our hours and it has had no impact at all, no complaints, not even a ripple from customers."

“New hours were presented and signed off by members. All went very smoothly and no complaints from customers. To be honest most customers were surprised we were open after 5pm anyway so there was no impact.”

“Changed hours some time ago, no complaints and no requests or challenges from customers to open longer than we do now.”

“Our original opening hours were 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday and 9.00am to 4.30pm Saturday. However, it soon became apparent that demand for the service was low outside the core hours of 9 am to 5pm. The longer opening hours also impacted on the performance in core hours as we had to stretch our staffing across a longer working day. We changed to 9am to 5.30 pm within 4 years of opening and there was virtually no resistance from members of customers.”

## Switchboard changes

15. Work has been underway for the last three years to review telephony infrastructures across the Council, part of this has included the introduction and roll-out of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) solutions. In the Council’s case this is Microsoft Lync. The roll-out in County Hall, Trent Bridge House, Lawn View House, Meadow House, Sherwood Energy Village and Sir John Robertson Way has reduced calls to the main switchboard number considerably. This programme of work is still ongoing.
16. Switchboard calls have been reducing year on year with current numbers at around 100 per day (down 452 per day since 2011/12).

Year	Switchboard calls / year	Call volumes	
		Per month	Per day
2011/12	132402	11034	552
2012/13	107242	8937	432
2013/14	80830	6736	337
2014/15	52461	4372	219
2015/16	40475	3373	167
2016/17	26141	2178	103
2017/18	Estimated 24500	2041	100

17. The current switchboard is old technology which often breaks down and is no longer fit for purpose. The switchboard has to be decommissioned by the end of March 2018 when it reaches its ‘end of life’ and is no longer able to be covered by a support contract. The infrastructure which supports the switchboard is not compatible with the move to the Cloud Programme and is being removed before March. An alternative therefore needs to be implemented as soon as possible.
18. Currently outside office hours or when switchboard staff are not available (for example during a fire alarm) switchboard calls are diverted to the Customer Services Centre. Staff at the CSC taking these calls use a “switchboard script” to deal with them so that the service delivered to the customer is seamless. It is proposed to move this activity permanently to the Customer Service Centre.

19. The move to the Customer Service Centre will improve resilience should there be an increase or spike in call volumes as any overflow of calls could be passed to a wider group of staff rather than the current pool of four switchboard staff who also undertake some reception duties. Spreading these calls amongst a wider staff group will enable the additional impact to be spread more evenly and make it easier to have resources available to cover annual leave, sickness etc. If volumes remained at current levels it would result in an increase of an average of 3 very short calls per person per day. But numbers of pure switchboard calls are expected to continue to reduce as customers migrate to the website for transactional activity and new technology is rolled out to staff internally.
20. In order for this to be a permanent solution a new number will be required for the switchboard as currently County Hall and Mercury House are on different telephony exchanges (0115 and 01623). If calls are to be routed to the Customer Service Centre permanently the number used needs to be one that can be ported to any part of the County. 0115 numbers cannot do this and as such there is a real risk in terms of business continuity should there be any system failure. The proposed new number for the switchboard will be 0300 500 0823. The Council's main customer service number will remain unchanged.
21. The implementation of a 0300 number will result in cost savings for customers calling from non-local numbers (Mansfield, Ashfield, Newark, Bassetlaw and some parts of Rushcliffe and Broxtowe). 0300 numbers are charged at a local rate for both land line and mobiles (free if local calls are included in any phone packages in place), so customers will benefit by reduced call costs.
22. Removal of a legacy system which is at its 'end of life' and being closed down as part of the Cloud Programme will result in a reduction of support requests to ICT colleagues freeing up resource to support the Cloud and other programmes of work.
23. The small number of additional calls to the Customer Service Centre will be absorbed within existing resources. Savings will be realised overall through the non-recruitment to and removal of current vacant switchboard posts at County Hall. No staff will be made redundant or adversely impacted. There will still be a requirement to provide reception services in both County Hall and Trent Bridge House and these arrangements will not be negatively impacted by the move of the Switchboard and will benefit from more resilience and focus on reception activity.
24. A detailed communications plan is being finalised, for implementation if the recommendations are agreed, to ensure that information about the change to switchboard arrangements is appropriately communicated to customers, key partners, members and staff.

### **Other Options Considered**

25. A number of options have been considered in relation to opening hours as set out below.
26. Reducing staffing levels on the Late Shift has been trialled. However this left the service exposed and vulnerable particularly when the team had absences or annual leave. Service resilience and business continuity could potentially be compromised in this situation

and short notice cover may be difficult to find as many staff have family commitments.

27. Leaving the hours as they are currently is a potential option but it does not ensure the most Effective use of resources and improved resourcing at peak times and therefore poses a serious reputational risk if demand is maintained or grows at the current levels and insufficient resources are available.
28. From 5.30pm-8pm each day and at weekends call volumes drop as there is minimal customer demand for the service during these times. Experience from other Councils who have reduced opening hours was that there was little or no impact in terms of customer satisfaction. All who responded said that they had no complaints from customers following the changes in hours. Therefore reducing opening hours is the recommended approach.
29. In relation to the proposed changes to Switchboard consideration has been given to no change but this poses too great a risk as the Council would be unable to support the system technology going forward. This is in line with the Council's agreed move to Cloud based solutions which are more cost effective, more agile and adaptable to the change.
30. Consideration has been given to retaining separate switchboard functionality. New infrastructure to support a new switchboard would be very costly and not 'fit' with the Council's Cloud Strategy or direction of travel in relation to migrating customer access or smarter ways of working for staff. The volume of calls does not warrant the level of investment required.
31. Consideration has been given to retaining the 0115 (Nottingham exchange) number but this can only be ported within 0115 exchanges so there would be little or no business continuity in place. 0300 numbers can be connected anywhere in the County, including to mobile numbers, so the cost will be the same for all customers regardless of where they are ringing from in the County.

## **Reasons for Recommendations**

32. Change to opening times will ensure staffing resources are used most effectively and can provide additional cover and resilience during peak call times. This will impact positively on the customer experience and the achievement of service levels during the day and increase the potential number of more complex enquiries dealt with by the Customer Services Centre, thus contributing to the delivery of savings across the Council.
33. Councils consulted that have already reduced their opening times, have stated that they have had no negative feedback and not seen any increase in customer complaints as a result of the change to hours within their contact centres. Only a very small number of customers are impacted by the changes due to the low call volumes at the times in question.
34. The recommendation also supports the Council's 'Digital First' approach encouraging customers to access services whenever and wherever they want by self-serving on-line.
35. The change to the switchboard will reduce costs, contribute to savings and enable improved services to be delivered to customers at reduced cost. It also supports the Council's strategy of migration to Cloud based services.

## **Statutory and Policy Implications**

36. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

### **Data Protection and Information Governance**

37. The recommendations in the report do not directly impact on how customer data is held or processed.

### **Financial Implications**

38. The changes to opening times and the switchboard detailed in the report will result in a net reduction in the operating cost of the Customer Services Centre. This net reduction in the operating cost will contribute to the approved savings target which has already been included in the 2017/18 revenue budget for the Customer Services Centre.

### **Human Resources Implications**

39. Staff at the Customer Services Centre are supportive of the reduction in opening hours. This will contribute to improved staff recruitment and retention and encourage more people with child care responsibilities to work at the Customer Service Centre which can be difficult and costly to access for shift work.
40. No staff are detrimentally impacted by the proposals to move the Switchboard operation to the Customer Service Centre. Reception services at County Hall and Trent Bridge House will continue unaffected. Vacant posts will be deleted to reflect the transfer of work to the Customer Services Centre which will be shared amongst existing staffing resources with a minimum impact.
41. Discussions have taken place with the recognised trades unions and staff in relation to the proposals.

### **Implications for Service Users**

42. There is minimal impact for customers calling out of hours as it only affects very few customers overall (less than 0.5% of telephone enquiries). 99.9% of customers call between 8am-5.30pm. The proposals will improve the service provided to the majority of users.
43. Information gathered from other councils that have completed this exercise has stated that there was little or no impact to service users and customers and the changes resulted in no customer complaints.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that Members:

- 1) Agree that Customer Service Centre opening times are changed to 8am-6pm Monday to Friday with effect from January 2018.
- 2) Agree the switchboard number is changed to 0300 500 0823 and calls directed to staff at the Customer Service Centre with effect from January 2018.

**Marjorie Toward**

Service Director – Customers and Human Resources  
Resources

**For any enquiries about this report please contact:** Marie Rowney, Group Manager, 0115 9772054, [marie.rowney@nottsc.gov.uk](mailto:marie.rowney@nottsc.gov.uk)

**Constitutional Comments (KK 14/11/17)**

44. The proposals in this report are within the remit of the Personnel Committee.

**Financial Comments (RWK 08/11/17)**

45. The financial implications are set out in paragraph 38 of the report.

**HR Comments (CLG 17/11/17)**

46. These are set out in the body of the report.

**Background Papers and Published Documents**

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

- None

**Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected**

- All