

Report to:	EXECUTIVE CABINET
Date:	26 July 2023
Executive Member:	Councillor Vimal Choksi, Executive Member, Towns & Communities
Reporting Officer:	Julian Jackson, Director of Place Emma Varnam, Assistant Director of Operations & Neighbourhoods
Subject:	NEW CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE DELIVERY MODEL - UPDATE
Report Summary:	<p>On 23 June 2021, Executive Cabinet approved public consultation on a proposed new delivery model for the face to face customer services function. This included a move away from a reactive drop-in service, to a new model that introduced appointments by telephone as well as face to face.</p> <p>Following public consultation, Executive Cabinet made a decision on 26 January 2022 to agree the new model with a commencement date of 14 March 2022.</p> <p>This report provides a further update 12 months after the new model has been operational to ensure quality of service, that vulnerable residents are able to access appointments and that it meets demand whilst at the same time being affordable and cost effective.</p>
Recommendations:	<p>It is recommended that:</p> <p>Executive Cabinet note the progress made on the implementation of the new customer service centre delivery model and future developments.</p>
Corporate Plan:	The Corporate Plan sets out a number of priorities and delivery of these priorities relies heavily on effective customer contact and care.
Policy Implications:	The report updates on implementation of a new model of customer service provision which will meet demand whilst being affordable and cost effective.
Financial Implications: (Authorised by the statutory Section 151 Officer & Chief Finance Officer)	<p>There are no direct financial implications arising from this update report.</p> <p>It can be noted that the changes to the new customer service centre delivery model has delivered the anticipated savings and operates within the recurrent revenue budget available.</p>
Legal Implications: (Authorised by the Borough Solicitor)	There are no immediate legal implications arising from this report which provides Members with an update on the implementation of the new customer service centre delivery model.
Risk Management:	The proposed new customer service model has been kept under review and closely monitored through customer and staff feedback to ensure that vulnerable residents are able to access appointments. The service has a robust process in place to ensure that any new claims for benefit commence within the week they are

referred so that residents do not miss any potential entitlement to benefit.

**Background
Information:**

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting Janine Yates, Team Manager, Welfare Rights Service.



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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Prior to Covid, customer services was offered solely on a face to face drop in basis from level one of Tameside One in Ashton. The service was suspended in March 2020 due to the pandemic, and for two years no face to face service was offered. Instead during that period, support for customers to complete housing benefit/council tax support applications was undertaken solely by telephone appointment.
- 1.2 On the 23 June 2021, a report was taken to Executive Cabinet that set out a case for a new face to face customer service offer. This included not to re-open the reactive drop-in and instead provide the service on an appointment only basis through the existing telephone channels with face to face offered only where it was deemed a telephone appointment was not appropriate.
- 1.3 Between June and September 2021, public consultation was undertaken on the proposed new customer services delivery model.
- 1.4 Executive Cabinet made a decision on 26 January 2022 to agree the new model which Members agreed on the initial principles but amended to allow customers to exercise choice around how they wished to access the service.
- 1.5 The new model was implemented on 14 March 2022 which introduced the delivery of appointments by telephone and face to face for those who preferred to be seen in that manner, alongside a system of triage.
- 1.6 This report provides a further update on the appointment based delivery model, 12 months after being operational.

2. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW CUSTOMER SERVICES DELIVERY MODEL

- 2.1 The new delivery model commenced 14 March 2022.
- 2.2 The principles of the new model are:
 - Promote, encourage and support a digital first model with the expectation that where possible, residents should self-serve utilising the Council website or other technology such as mobile applications (Apps) where available
 - For those able to self-serve digitally, but without access to the internet or a suitable device, access to a PC via any library in the borough
 - A supported service offer over the telephone, web chat and email to assist customers with their enquiries
 - All libraries within the borough will continue to offer Level 2 support to customers on a drop-in basis
 - Offer telephone appointments to customers who choose to be supported in this manner to make a claim for housing benefit or council tax support etc
 - Face to face appointments will be available to customers to ensure that everyone is able to access services and assistance without disadvantage
 - Professionals supporting a vulnerable customer will be able to book an appointment on a person's behalf
- 2.3 Prior to going live, front line officers, key partners and stakeholders were briefed on the new model including the different ways that customers could make an appointment.
- 2.4 Publicity was provided through all of the council's communication channels including social media and via partner organisations/community groups. A workshop was delivered at the Partnership Engagement Network on 28 June 2022.

- 2.5 Appointments are bookable by email, telephone, web chat and at any library during staffed hours. Appointments can also be made via the reception desk on level one of Tameside One, Ashton. Professionals and other council departments are able to refer customers directly and make appointments on their behalf.
- 2.6 Library staff have direct telephone access into the service to enable them to make immediate appointments for customers presenting at the library counter who do not have access to on-line or telephone channels.
- 2.7 In order to operate an appointment based service, a booking system was required. A system used a number of years ago has been updated and brought back into use and this has been effective in managing appointments.
- 2.8 A member of customer services staff triages referrals, unless booked in at the reception desk. This is usually via a telephone call to the customer on receipt of the referral to discuss the issue they need help with. This ensures adequate time is allocated to the appointment and that the customer knows what they need to bring with them.
- 2.9 Customers are able to choose either a telephone or face to face appointment at a time convenient to them. Appointments are offered on the same day if the service is able to accommodate.
- 2.10 The service has a process in place to ensure that any new claims for benefit commence within the week they are referred so that residents do not miss any potential entitlement to benefit.
- 2.11 In this report, Level 1 and Level 2 enquiries are referred to. Level 1 enquiries are regarding in-depth Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support queries; these are dealt solely by the dedicated customer services staff. Level 2 enquiries are to book, pay, request a service, hand in documents and verification of housing benefit and council tax documents. All libraries in the borough can deal with Level 2 enquiries on a drop-in basis during staffed hours.

3. DEMAND FOR THE SERVICE

- 3.1 **Appendix 1** outlines the full data analysis for the first 12 months that the new model has been operational. Key headline data for the period is summarised below:
- 3,338 customer appointments have been undertaken. Of these, 2,174 were carried out face to face and 1,164 conducted by telephone
 - 9,243 issues have been recorded, broken down into 3,569 Level 1 enquiries and 5,674 Level 2 enquiries. It is common for customers to present with more than one issue in an appointment and therefore the total issues recorded exceeds the number of appointments that have taken place
 - Libraries have dealt with more Level 2 enquiries since the new customer service model was introduced; 10,502 enquiries in 2022/23 compared with 6,709 in 2019/20
 - The majority of appointments have been made by customers presenting at the Tameside One reception desk as well as via the Councils Exchequer Service
 - Housing Benefit and Council Tax matters relate to the majority of appointments that are booked

4. CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

- 4.1 Feedback from customers has been sought to gain understanding about using the new appointment based service and to identify any improvements which could be made.
- 4.2 Information was obtained via a survey which was available in libraries in paper format and also electronically. The results were collated and can be seen in full at **Appendices and 2 3** of this report along with a summary analysis of the findings.
- 4.3 833 responses were received to the survey and the key headlines are:
- Initially, only 50% of people said they knew how to access the service. As a result of undertaking additional communications including social media and newsletters, by March 2023 this had increased to 98%.
 - Overall, 51.8% found it easy or very easy to access the service with only 1.8% finding it difficult or very difficult. The remainder reported it being neither easy nor difficult.
 - The majority of people reported they had accessed the service for housing benefit and council tax purposes.
 - 99.8% of respondents reported being satisfied with the waiting time for an appointment.
 - Overall 92.5% of respondents stated they were satisfied or very satisfied with a further 6.9% saying they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

5. REFINEMENTS TO THE DELIVERY MODEL

- 5.1 Security hours were initially scheduled around the times the service had allocated for face to face appointments. As the model developed, it became apparent that customers required more flexibility around when face to face appointments were available. Therefore, more security hours were put in place in order to facilitate this.
- 5.2 At the start of the new model, staff resource was focused around delivery of appointments and the triage of referrals. It was initially envisaged that Security would respond to anyone dropping into customer services in Tameside One by either directing people to the library for Level 2 help or providing direct contact details for customer services if an appointment was required. Opinion changed as the cost of living crisis started to impact and more customers were presenting with more complex enquiries that required an appointment. This led to the re-instatement of the meet and greet offer to facilitate the booking of appointments including same day appointments where available. Further feedback from the Tameside Poverty Truth Commission who visited Tameside One resulted in this offer being improved further with the development of a staffed reception point on level one.
- 5.3 As demand for appointments increased, the ability for the customer services officers to also answer calls into the service became an issue. Therefore calls to 342 2284 have been routed through the contact centre, with customer service officers answering these calls when capacity allows. This has meant that customer service staff are able to prioritise customer appointments and it has also developed a more efficient and blended offer with contact centre. Telephone handlers in the contact centre are trained to recognise callers who require an appointment and are able to make appropriate referrals into the service.

6. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

- 6.1 The reception offer will continue to support customers, official visitors and partners that operate from Tameside One. Future relocation of the contact centre to Tameside One may create opportunities for contact centre staff to provide reception desk cover on level one.
- 6.2 The customer service offer will continue to support and be responsive to the council's response to poverty including the Helping Hand campaign.
- 6.3 Communications through social media and other channels will continue to ensure residents know how to access the service.
- 6.4 In light of the low number of referrals received from partners since the new model launched, further communications will be undertaken with all key partners around how to access an appointment for the people they are working with. This will be supported by the continuation of regular meetings with partners who are operating from level one in Tameside One.
- 6.5 The model will continue to be kept under review, to ensure it meets the needs of customers and that staffing levels are adequate to meet demand. This will include on-going collection of feedback through customer survey which will be monitored on a monthly basis.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Implementation of the new service delivery model has achieved the required budget saving of £0.051m part year in 2021/22 and £0.097m annually from 2022/23. This has been delivered through reducing staffing levels by not replacing officers that had left the service and their posts being deleted.
- 7.2 The implementation of a staffed reception desk has led to a budget pressure. Various options are currently being explored including utilising contact centre staff to provide the reception cover in order to deliver the service.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1 Since the launch of the new model in March 2022, demand has increased from 821 appointments in 2021/22 to 3338 appointments in 2022/23.
- 8.2 Libraries are dealing with more footfall from customers dropping in for Level 2 support, which has enabled customer services to operate on less staff whilst providing a high quality service targeted at Level 1 support that meets demand.
- 8.3 The option to book appointments via all libraries during staffed hours has ensured that residents not digitally connected or who are vulnerable, have been able to access the service with 249 people accessing in this manner. Consistent communications will continue to go out so that people get to know about the different ways to access the service and how to make an appointment.
- 8.4 More customers are visiting Tameside One in person to make an appointment although this could be related to the economy opening up and more people visiting Ashton following the easing of Covid restrictions. The reception offer provides a professional welcome and support to make appointments, particularly to vulnerable residents, as well as directing people to the library depending on the type of enquiry.
- 8.5 Customer feedback revealed waiting times for appointments and quality of service was positive. There were some early issues around customers knowing how to contact the service, however this has significantly improved as a result of consistent communications going out.

8.6 Overall, the new service model appears to be working well with referrals monitored each day along with staffing levels to ensure customers are seen promptly and by the channel of access that best suits their needs.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 As set out at the front of the report.