

<b>Report to:</b>	<b>EXECUTIVE CABINET</b>
<b>Date:</b>	23 June 2021
<b>Executive Member:</b>	Councillor Allison Gwynne – Neighbourhoods, Community Safety and Environment
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Emma Varnam – Assistant Director, Operations and Neighbourhoods
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>NEW CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE DELIVERY MODEL</b>
<b>Report Summary:</b>	<p>On 26 August 2015 Executive Cabinet, following a comprehensive review of the Council's face to face Customer Service function, agreed a new model for the service.</p> <p>Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic the service consisted of Level 2 service (book, pay, request a service and verification of housing benefit documents) at all libraries in the Borough. Additionally Ashton Customer Services offered a reactive drop in Level 2 service and also in-depth housing benefit and council tax support advice (Level 1 service).</p> <p>The service was suspended over 12 months ago in March 2020 due to the Covid 19 pandemic and no face to face Customer Service function has been offered since that time. The report reviews the previous face to face contact enquiry type, considers the impact the pandemic has had on how residents access services, the cost to provide the service and proposes a future service model based on digital first where possible followed by supported channels i.e. telephone/web chat/email etc. Face to face customer service would be available but only for those enquiries from residents where other channels are deemed inappropriate.</p> <p>Public consultation on the future service provision is proposed to take place for a 12 week period commencing at the end of June 2021 before any final decisions are made on the service model for the future.</p>
<b>Recommendations:</b>	<p>That Executive Cabinet be recommended to agreed that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) the reasons for a review and the proposed new delivery model are considered</li> <li>(ii) public consultation on the proposed delivery model is undertaken from the 28 June 2021 to 19 September 2021 with the results being presented at Executive Cabinet for further consideration at the end of the year.</li> </ul>
<b>Corporate Plan:</b>	The Corporate Plan sets out a number of priorities and delivery of these priorities relies heavily on effective customer contact and care.
<b>Policy Implications:</b>	The report seeks agreement to commence public consultation on the future face to face customer service provision.
<b>Financial Implications:</b>	The report sets out details of a consultation for a proposed new customer services delivery model.
<b>(Authorised by the statutory Section 151 Officer &amp; Chief Finance</b>	It is envisaged that if a self-serve model with support options via telephone, web chat and face to face appointments were

**Officer)**

implemented, the estimated savings that would be realised equate to £0.051m part year in 2021/22 increasing to £0.097m annually from 2022/23 and recurrently thereafter. These savings will contribute to the overall savings allocation for the Operations and Neighbourhoods directorate of £1.823m in 2021/22 increasing to £2.415m by 2025/26.

For context, the 2021/22 net revenue budget for Customer Services is £0.220m. This value is net of the aforementioned estimated savings for 2021/22 and also includes a 5% vacancy factor savings allocation on the related pay budgets. Section 9.2 references two recently vacated posts within the service that will not be advertised for recruitment. The annual saving that will be realised by non recruitment to these posts is £0.045m.

Members should note that the estimated savings values realised via this proposed new delivery model currently assumes that there will be no additional investment required in any related systems. Clearly any additional investment required would lead to an increase in savings that will need to be realised by the directorate to ensure a balanced budget is delivered on a recurrent basis.

Table 3 in section 4.1 provides prior year average unit cost details of different types of contact with the Council for comparator purposes. These include web based, call centre enquires and face to face enquiries. It should be noted that the existing contact type relating to customer services is face to face.

The financial implications of the consultation outcome will be included in the subsequent report to Members towards the end of this calendar year.

**Legal Implications:  
(Authorised by the  
Borough Solicitor)**

The Council has a duty to ensure that its service delivery represents best value. Therefore in light of the unprecedented shift in delivery methods caused by covid 19 now is an appropriate time to review delivery methods.

The outcome and the EIA and the consultation are likely to be critical to this project particularly in relation to accessibility. Therefore the decision makers will be required to consider the findings carefully as part of the decision making process.

If the delivery model is to change there will be staffing implications which will require support from HR and consideration will have to be given to the implication of any redundancy costs to the proposed savings.

**Risk Management:**

It is necessary to fully understand the impact any changes may have on the public accessing Council services. The consultation process suggested in the report seeks to understand the views of previous users, prior to the Covid 19 pandemic, and future users' needs including those with a protected characteristic. A full Equality Impact Assessment will be completed which will clearly identify and mitigate where possible any negative impact of any service changes.

**Background Information:** The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting Mandy Kinder, Head of Cultural and Customer Services:



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 On 26 August 2015 Executive Cabinet, following a comprehensive review of the Council's face to face Customer Service function, agreed a new model for the service. The review took into account the usage of the service at that time, the likely reduction in the need for the service in the future, the increasing cost to serve and the public's determination in consultation that this was an area where budget cuts could be made.
- 1.2 It was determined that the service offer would consist of Level 2 service (book, pay, request a service and verification of housing benefit documents) which would take place at all libraries in the Borough. Additionally Ashton Customer Services would be retained and continue to offer a reactive drop in Level 2 service and also in-depth housing benefit and council tax support advice (Level 1 service).
- 1.3 The service was offered from Clarence Arcade during the period when Tameside One was being built and moved into level one of the new building in March 2019.
- 1.4 The service was suspended in March 2020 due to the Covid 19 pandemic and no face to face Customer Service function has been offered since that time. During that period officers have been supporting call centre operators handling customer enquiries via the telephone, web chat or on-line. Officers have also been assisting customers to complete housing benefit/council tax support applications by telephone appointment.
- 1.5 Over twelve months have now elapsed without the face to face customer service, the landscape of customer service has had an abrupt and enforced change requiring customers to very quickly become familiar with accessing services via other channels. UK Government figures estimate that 96% of households in Great Britain have internet access, increased from 93% in 2019 and 90% in 2018. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) indicates that in quarter 1 of 2020 93% of people in Greater Manchester had used the internet in the last 3 months or prior to that, an increase from 92.9% in 2019 and 91.4% in 2018.
- 1.6 Another consequence of the coronavirus pandemic has meant that this has been one of the most challenging budget rounds faced by the Council. The Council's 2021/22 revenue budget assumes savings proposals of £8.9m that increase to £14.8m by 2025/26. However, despite these levels of savings, the Council still has a financial gap to close of £14.3m in 2022/23 which increases to £22.3m by 2025/26 based on current assumptions.
- 1.7 It is now timely to undertake a further review of the service to determine how this might be offered in the future taking into account the changes in peoples' attitudes to technology, the future need for a reactive drop in face to face service and the fact that face to face customer service has always been the highest cost channel with the lowest volume of customers.
- 1.8 This report sets out what a future service offer may look like and seeks permission to undertake public consultation to fully understand and consider views before implementing any changes.

## 2. SERVICE PRIOR TO AND DURING COVID 19

- 2.1 Prior to the pandemic face to face customer services was offered on a reactive drop in basis from level one of Tameside One in Ashton. The opening hours were:
  - **Monday – Wednesday:** 8.30am – 5.00pm
  - **Thursday:** 8.30am – 4.30pm
  - **Friday:** 8.30am – 4.00pm

- 2.2 Customers attending the service would be greeted by a Meet and Greet Officer who would triage the enquiry and assist with issuing tickets to the relevant queue (Customer Services, CAB, Credit Union, Planning etc). This officer could also respond to quick general enquiries depending on how busy the customer service floor was at any point in time.
- 2.3 Customer Services Officers, with a higher level of training, would handle all types of enquiries including those categorised as Level 1 (in-depth housing benefit and Council tax enquiries) alongside Level 2 enquires (book, pay, request a service and verification of housing benefit documents).
- 2.4 In addition to the offer at Tameside One, all libraries in the Borough also offered Level 2 service to customers, including Ashton library which is also based in Tameside One on the ground floor.
- 2.5 During the pandemic it has not been possible to offer face to face customer services and therefore the service was suspended in March 2020. During this time officers from the service have been working at home handling telephone and web chat contact alongside the Corporate Contact Centre staff. The contact centre responds to calls categorised as Level 2 and primarily consist of refuse, street scene, parking, blue badge administration etc but also the Covid helpline calls.
- 2.6 The majority of Council Tax and Housing Benefit calls are responded to by the Revenues and Benefits service rather than in the Corporate Contact Centre. However those customers who require assistance to complete an application form are still able to access assistance but this is currently over the phone or web chat by Customer Services Officers.

### 3. DEMAND IN CUSTOMER SERVICES

- 3.1 Prior to Covid 19 the demand in Customer Services, whilst showing some fluctuations, had reduced significantly over the years as demonstrated in **Table 1**.

**Table 1**

Year	Number of visitors
2003/04	100126
2004/05	104986
2005/06	92560
2006/07	81110
2007/08	83463
2008/09	74694
2009/10	77599
2010/11	83114
2011/12	75896
2012/13	71262
2013/14	62440
2014/15	43325
2015/16	32682
2016/17	31411
2017/18	38020
2018/19	32236
2019/20	32359

- 3.2 The majority of demand presenting at the face to face Customer Service Centre is in respect of Housing and Council Tax matters. **Table 2** below details contact type and denotes whether the contact is categorised as Level 1 or Level 2 contact.

**Table 2**

<b>April 2019 – March 2020</b>			
<b>Type of enquiry</b>	<b>Level 1</b>	<b>Level 2</b>	<b>Total</b>
Housing Benefit	6,096	6,037	<b>12,133</b>
Council Tax	4,580	4,584	<b>9,164</b>
Education Admissions		379	<b>379</b>
Adult Social Services		314	<b>314</b>
Blue Badges		4,188	<b>4,188</b>
Waste Management		1,545	<b>1,545</b>
Parking		274	<b>274</b>
Referred to Partners		1,875	<b>1,875</b>
Street scene/highways		364	<b>364</b>
Other enquiries	361	1,762	<b>2,123</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,037</b>	<b>21,322</b>	<b>32,359</b>

- 3.3 Analysis of the enquires received at Ashton Customer Service Centre during the 12 months prior to Covid 19 indicate that nearly 66% were Level 2 enquiries and only 34% were Level 1 enquiries. During normal operating times all libraries can assist with Level 2 enquiries, meaning that customers who are travelling to Ashton could actually seek assistance at a venue closer to their home. Also, many Level 2 enquiries can be dealt with over the phone, via webchat or email.
- 3.4 Further analysis of the Level 1 enquiries has revealed that just under 83% (9131) could be dealt with by other contact channels, albeit in some cases assisted by a Customer Services officer trained to handle Level 1 enquiries. The remaining 17% (1906) could also be dealt with via other channels although this may be less likely due to the nature of the enquiries, for example: assist in completion of blue badge application, council tax billing, housing benefit appeals and over payments etc. Whilst these types of enquiries can be handled via other contact channels, some vulnerable customers may still need face to face assistance in these areas.

#### **4. COST OF SERVICE**

- 4.1 The cost of each transaction for the face to face customer service function far outweighs the cost of other channels. **Table 3** below details the cost for each of the channels:

**Table 3**

	<b>Web</b>		<b>Call Centre</b>		<b>Face to Face</b>	
<b>Period</b>	<b>Volume</b>	<b>Average Cost</b>	<b>Volume</b>	<b>Average Cost per contact</b>	<b>Volume</b>	<b>Average Cost per visit</b>
2003/04	452378	£0.45	303511	£1.29	100126	£8.57
2004/05	679813	£0.30	314602	£1.20	104986	£8.46
2005/06	1499904	£0.14	275555	£1.31	92560	£8.92
2006/07	1954604	£0.07	225516	£1.46	81110	£9.23
2007/08	1984500	£0.06	272043	£1.28	83463	£9.07
2008/09	2286087	£0.05	219804	£1.68	74694	£9.90
2009/10	2423329	£0.05	211957	£1.65	77599	£8.70
2010/11	2378582	£0.04	197061	£1.59	83065	£7.96
2011/12	2601214	£0.01	170532	£1.61	75828	£7.62

2012/13	2316793	£0.02	180135	£1.35	71210	£6.08
2013/14	2244788	£0.02	166957	£1.36	62440	£5.55
2014/15	3000404	£0.01	165369	£1.31	43225	£7.48
2015/16	3338273	£0.01	179001	£1.26	32682	£10.52
2016/17	3658006	£0.01	156055	£1.47	31411	£7.68
2017/18	3332619	£0.01	121061	£1.84	38020	£5.92
2018/19	3218502	£0.01	104912	£2.20	32236	£6.00
2019/20	3245374	£0.01	96461	£2.32	32359	£7.08

- 4.2 The cost to serve is calculated using the number of visits against the cost of providing the service and therefore it follows that if the number of visits reduces and the cost to provide the service does not take a corresponding reduction, the cost per visit will increase.
- 4.3 Over the years staffing levels have reduced to reflect the reducing number of visits, but in a reactive drop in service model, staffing levels cannot be reduced below that required to ensure sufficient cover is available during peak demand and holiday/sickness.
- 4.4 The volume of visitors has remained fairly static over the 5 year period prior to the pandemic, however as the service has not been available for the past 12 months it is highly likely that were it to return as a drop in service, visitor numbers would be significantly reduced as residents have become accustomed to alternative contact channels. If this were the case the cost per visit would increase dramatically.

## **5. POTENTIAL FUTURE FACE TO FACE SERVICE MODEL**

- 5.1 It is clear that with the advent of social trends and technological advancements the way customers access services has changed over recent years.
- 5.2 UK Government figures estimate that in January/February 2020 96% of households in Great Britain had access to the internet, an increase from 93% in 2019 and 90% in 2018. Internet connections in households with one adult 65 years and over had increased by seven percentage points to 80% since 2019, although these households have the lowest percentage of internet connections. 87% of all adults had shopped on-line in the previous 12 months with those aged 65 years and older showing the highest growth from raising from 16% in 2008 to 65% in 2020.
- 5.3 The Office of National Statistics (ONS) indicates that in quarter 1 of 2020 93% of people in Greater Manchester had used the internet in the last 3 months or prior to that, an increase from 92.9% in 2019 and 91.4% in 2018.
- 5.4 The pandemic has pushed the use of technology to another level and served to create a catalyst for change in peoples' attitudes. Many who would not have previously used technology in any aspect of their lives are now turning to such platforms to order shopping, access services, keep in touch with family/friends etc.
- 5.5 Some evidence of this change can be seen following the Council introducing a web chat function in early 2019/20. Since implementation over 12,000 enquiries have been responded to via this channel.
- 5.6 Residents are able to access services on the Council's website for both information and advice but also to complete applications for Housing Benefit, Council Tax Support, discounts/exemptions and notify of change of circumstances etc. Applications can be completed on all devices eg PCs, laptops, tablets and smart phones.

- 5.7 It is worth noting that we do not hold any qualitative data on why residents using face to face customer services need or choose to do so. However, the service has been suspended for over 12 months and residents have had to make contact via other channels including telephone, web chat, on-line etc. During this time new technology skills will have been learnt, utilised and become common place for many residents and continued utilisation of these skills should be encouraged when accessing services in the future rather than reverting back to reliance on expensive face to face services.
- 5.8 Customers have been assisted by Council services adapting requirements to access their service, for example evidence for Housing Benefit claims is being accepted by screenshot from telephones and emailed to the relevant service. Customer Service Officers have been assisting residents to complete claim forms for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support over the telephone rather than face to face. Wherever possible processes that make it easier and more cost effective to access services should be retained in the future.
- 5.9 It is probably fair to conclude that if a customer has accessed a service by an alternative channel whilst face to face customer services has been suspended, and that contact produced the required results to satisfy the enquiry, accessing by that method in the future would be preferable to making the trip to customer services and queuing up at a drop in service with no guarantee of not having a long wait time.
- 5.10 As detailed in section 4 of this report face to face Customer Service is the most expensive channel, yet it serves the fewest customers. The majority of enquiries during 2019/20 to the service (66%) were Level 2 enquiries which can be dealt with in all Tameside libraries. The ideal would be that expensive face to face customer service is only provided to those residents that really need it and those that can self-serve and use other more cost effective channels do so.
- 5.11 As protectors of public funds it is incumbent upon all Council services to review the service offer from time to time and ensure services are cost effective whilst meeting residents' needs. The Covid 19 pandemic has created a unique circumstance where change has been accelerated at pace and this change has led to many residents becoming less reliant on face to face services. These circumstances should be capitalised upon when determining future service provision rather than simply returning to the previous landscape and it is therefore now time to undertake a further review of the Customer Service provision with the main drivers for this being:
- Covid-19 and the health and safety of residents and staff with the likelihood that we will be living with Covid for the foreseeable future
  - Using learning from the lockdown to shape the future service and build back better
  - A desire to improve and modernise the service offer to residents
  - Improvements in technology and on-line support
  - Understanding that visiting Ashton is not always the most convenient or cost effective option for residents
  - Take into consideration vulnerable customers' needs to ensure they can access services and do not suffer any detriment
  - Use the limited resources in the best way possible and ensure the most cost effective delivery model which also meets residents requirements
- 5.12 The proposed service model for the future would be based on providing the most appropriate access channel according to customers' requirements and would be very similar to the current offer but with the addition of face to face contact where necessary and only for those where other channels would not be suitable. The principles would be:
- not to re-open the expensive reactive drop in Customer Service centre based in Tameside One at Ashton in the previous format
  - retain Level 2 enquiries at all Tameside Libraries



- 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.
- where this is not possible a supported service offer over the telephone, web chat, email etc to assist customers with their enquiries.
- where more detailed assistance is required, for example completing a housing benefit application, a telephone call back service by appointment would be available
- face to face appointments only for the most vulnerable to ensure that residents are able to access services and assistance without disadvantage. Appointments will be bookable by telephone.

5.13 There is no doubt that some customers may be more vulnerable and/or do need additional support to access to services or make enquiries. This can be because the enquiry is complex, there are multiple issues or there are additional health problems which affect a person's ability to manage their situation. Any new service model must take into account all residents' needs and therefore some face to face element would be retained. It is proposed that this would be by appointment only rather than drop-in and would be following a triage process to understand the nature of the enquiry and the assistance required.

## **6. TAMESIDE AND GLOSSOP DIGITAL STRATEGY**

6.1 The Tameside and Glossop Digital Strategy was approved by Cabinet in September 2020 and it sets out a five year vision and plan for the use of digital technologies for Tameside Council (TMBC) and Tameside and Glossop Clinical Commissioning Group (T&G CCG). The strategy details both organisations ambitions to be at the forefront of delivering world class accessible, engaging and targeted digital communication channels for residents and as such reviewing and remodelling Customer Services is an important stream of work which will present significant opportunities.

6.2 Specific actions within the Digital Strategy include:

- The development of a single economy wide digital front door offering online public services that are joined up, user-friendly and make sense.
- A new single virtual Call Centre for all Council services with new features such as web chat and automation.
- The use of new and emerging technology and Artificial Intelligence to delivery better services and smarter, tailored digital interactions.

6.3 The Digital Strategy will become an important strand of a wider corporate business transformation strategy and delivery programme, a proposition for which will be presented to the May Budget Board meeting.

6.4 The new model for face to face customer services in Operations and Neighbourhoods is therefore the first phase of a wider corporate review of how the Council interacts with the public and businesses, a process that will ensure that in the future we have the appropriate systems, skills and capacity to deliver longer term benefits both financially and qualitatively. This new overarching customer services model will include but not limited to the following areas:

- Planning
- Enforcement
- Adults social care
- Children's social care
- Complaints
- Payment services
- Advice and guidance

## **7. PUBLIC CONSULTATION**

- 7.1 It is proposed that specific public consultation is undertaken on the possible future service model, to seek views of those who have used the service when it was operational and any others who may have views, before any final decision is made.
- 7.2 Such consultation would be in the form of a standard questionnaire with an introduction to explain the reasons for the proposed changes followed by a series of questions to seek relevant views which would be used to shape the future provision of the service. The questionnaire would provide free format text boxes to allow people to provide comments, views and suggestions which would be taken into account.
- 7.3 It is proposed that the survey forms part of the Council's Big Conversation process to allow the results to be evaluated in a consistent manner and would be available for a 12 week period. It is suggested that the consultation could open on Monday 28 June 2021 and close on Sunday 19 September 2021. The consultation pack is included at **Appendix 1**.
- 7.4 The link to consultation would be shared with partners and engagement channels including the Partnership Engagement Network, Community Champions. Social media channels would also be utilised alongside staff within libraries actively encouraging people to complete the questionnaire.
- 7.5 Views of elected Members and other services of the Council would be sought as part of the consultation process. Consultation would also be undertaken with staff in Customer Services and Libraries to ensure that they are kept fully informed on the proposed changes and to gain their views.

## **8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

- 8.1 Before taking any decision on the future of customer services the Council will need to fully understand the impact of that decision on communities and in particular the impact on those groups with a recognised protected characteristic. For this purpose a full equality impact assessment (EIA) would need to be developed which includes analysis of the consultation responses.
- 8.2 An EIA has been undertaken to ensure the public consultation is robust and takes into account the views of residents who wish to have their views heard but particularly those groups with a protected characteristic. The EIA is included at **Appendix 2**.
- 8.3 The consultation would be by way of a questionnaire which would be available on-line and in paper form, along with personal assistance with completion at any of our libraries (subject to Covid 19 safety measures).
- 8.4 The returns being received will be monitored regularly throughout the consultation to ensure that returns are being received from groups with a protected characteristic. If further actions need to be taken during the consultation period to increase returns from these groups they will be implemented accordingly.

## **9. STAFF IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 If the proposed service model is implemented staff levels within the service would need to be reviewed. Sufficient staff would be required to conduct telephone appointments to support people with their enquiries and also to undertake face to face appointments where necessary.

- 9.2 A new staffing structure would be developed and there may be a competitive process for some of the positions. Two officers have left the service recently and have not been replaced, however it is envisaged that the proposed service model would take fewer staff to deliver and further staff reductions would be required.
- 9.3 It would be necessary to consult with staff and unions to ensure they are fully aware of any new service model and staffing structure.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 If a new service model is implemented and staffing levels reduced accordingly there would be a budget reduction, assuming staff either leave the authority or are re-deployed into other roles.
- 10.2 It is envisaged that if a self-serve model with support options via telephone, web chat and face to face appointments were implemented, the estimated savings that would be realised equate to £0.051m part year in 2021/22 increasing to £0.097m annually from 2022/23 and recurrently thereafter. These savings will contribute to the overall savings allocation for the Operations and Neighbourhoods directorate of £1.823m in 2021/22 increasing to £2.415m by 2025/26.
- 10.3 For context, the 2021/22 net revenue budget for Customer Services is £0.220m. This value is net of the aforementioned estimated savings for 2021/22 and also includes a 5% vacancy factor savings allocation on the related pay budgets. Section 9.2 references two recently vacated posts within the service that will not be advertised for recruitment. The annual saving that will be realised by non-recruitment to these posts is £0.045m.
- 10.4 Members should note that the estimated savings values realised via this proposed new delivery model currently assumes that there will be no additional investment required in any related systems. Clearly any additional investment required would lead to an increase in savings that will need to be realised by the directorate to ensure a balanced budget is delivered on a recurrent basis.

## **11. RISK**

- 11.1 There is a risk that the consultation does not reach all those that would have an interest in the future customer service model. This risk can be mitigated by ensuring the consultation is shared with as many organisations and services as possible asking them to forward on to their clients/service users. Additionally utilising social media will assist in reaching more residents.
- 11.2 If a new service model is implemented any budget reductions depend on staff leaving the service. Two officers have already left the service recently and will not be replaced. If there were displaced staff, following recruitment to roles available in any new service model, they would be supported to seek alternative roles within the Council or if voluntary severance were available some may choose that option.
- 11.3 Consideration may need to be given to investing in a basic appointment booking system, however one was developed in-house some years ago and may still be available. If a new system is required there would be additional cost for this which would need to be factored into the overall cost to provide the service.
- 11.4 The service redesign forms part of the savings proposals for the Operations and Neighbourhoods Directorate. Additional savings proposals have been made as part of a

cross-cutting project for Digital Transformation. When the detail of how those savings will be realised the implication of those service changes can be added to these service redesign proposals.

## **12. CONCLUSION**

- 12.1 Over recent years the way customers access services has changed and the Covid 19 pandemic has pushed this to another level and served to create a catalyst for change in peoples' attitudes meaning people are now learning to use technology in many different aspects of their lives. UK Government figures estimate that households access to the internet continues to rise when compared to previous years.
- 12.2 Face to face customer services has been suspended for over 12 months due to the pandemic. During this time new technology skills will have been learnt, utilised and become common place for many residents and continued use of these skills should be encouraged when accessing services in the future rather than reverting back to reliance on face to face services.
- 12.3 Customer Services is the most expensive access channel and analysis of contacts made during the year prior to the Covid 19 pandemic revealed that 66% of these were Level 2 enquiries and could be handled at libraries across the Borough or via more cost effective access channels. Additionally of the remaining 34% of enquiries, which were categorised as Level 1, just under 83% of these could also be dealt with by another more cost effective access channel.
- 12.4 As the most expensive contact channel serving the lowest volume of customers, the face to face customer service should be retained only for those residents that would not be able to use an alternative access channel. This may be due to reasons such as complexity of the enquiry or health issues affecting a person's ability to manage their situation etc.
- 12.5 It is proposed that a new customer contact model should encourage, promote and support self-service digital first via the website or applications where available but retain other supported channels, telephone, web chat, email etc for those who need additional assistance. Face to face contact would feature in the model, but only for those where other contact channels would not be appropriate.
- 12.6 To determine the impact of such a customer contact model, it is proposed that public consultation is undertaken for a period of 12 weeks from 28 June 2021 – 19 September 2021 to seek views of residents and others who wish to respond.
- 12.7 A full EIA would be completed to fully understand the impact on the communities and particularly those with a protected characteristic under the Equalities Act 2010.

## **13. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 13.1 As set out at the front of the report.