

<b>Report to:</b>	<b>EXECUTIVE CABINET</b>
<b>Date:</b>	26 January 2022
<b>Executive Member:</b>	Councillor Allison Gwynne – Neighbourhoods, Community Safety and Environment
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Ian Saxon, Director of Place Emma Varnam – Assistant Director, Operations & Neighbourhoods
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>NEW CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE DELIVERY MODEL</b>
<b>Report Summary:</b>	On 23 June 2021, Executive Cabinet approved public consultation on a proposed new delivery model for the face to face customer services function. This report sets out the findings of the consultation and defines the proposed model of service delivery for the future.
<b>Recommendations:</b>	That Executive Cabinet be recommended to agree: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) The proposed new customer service model is implemented, subject to consultation with staff with an anticipated implementation date of 14 March 2022.</li> <li>(ii) The delivery model is reviewed following implementation 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. A further report will be presented to Executive Cabinet after 12 months of the new model being operational.</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 recommends a new model of face to face customer services provision is implemented to meet demand whilst being affordable and cost effective.
<b>Financial Implications:</b> <b>(Authorised by the statutory Section 151 Officer &amp; Chief Finance Officer)</b>	<p>The Place directorate has identified savings proposals of £2.777m in 2021/22 increasing to £3.998m by 2025/26.</p> <p>The proposed service model outlined in this report delivers an annual saving of £0.051m in 2021/22 (part year effect). This increases to £0.097m per year on a recurrent basis from 2022/23 onwards. The part year savings in 2021/22 have been realised prior to the proposed 14 March 2022 implementation date of the new model, as four officers (3.19 full time equivalent employees) have recently left the service and have not been replaced.</p> <p>Members should note that the savings realised by this proposed new delivery model currently assumes that there will be no additional investment required in any related appointment booking systems (as referenced in section 14.5). 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.</p> <p>Further transformational savings opportunities are being considered as part of the Corporate Digital Strategy review (as referenced in</p>

section 6 of the report), the details of which will be reported to Members at a later date.

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

Members are being asked to carefully consider the feedback from the consultation and Equality Impact Assessment set out in this report as part of the decision making regarding customer services adopting a digital first model.

If Members are minded to make the decision they need to be content that the mitigations in relation to any equality impact are sufficient.

Affected staff have already been consulted with in relation to the possible changes to the delivery of the service. If Members decide to progress with the digital first model then staff and Union engagement will be required in relation to any employment related changes. Support will be required from the council's Human Resources (HR) department and the relevant HR procedures followed.

It would be advisable for there to be a review of the performance of the service 12 months after a digital approach is adopted to monitor that both access to and quality of the service.

**Risk Management:**

It is necessary to fully understand the impact any changes may have on the public accessing Council services. Consultation on the proposed new customer service model has been undertaken to understand the impact of any new service model on current and future service users, including those with a protected characteristic. A full Equality Impact Assessment has been completed which identifies and mitigates where possible any negative impact of changes on service users.

Concerns were raised in the consultation around how the new service model would be communicated and how appointments would be accessed to ensure that vulnerable residents do not slip through the net. To make sure this does not happen, there will be a robust triage process and communication plan to inform residents how they can access the service including how to book an appointment. Face to face and telephone appointments will be offered and organised to ensure that customers are seen promptly and staffing levels will be kept under review to ensure demand for the service is managed.

The proposed new customer service model will also be kept under review and closely monitored to ensure quality of service and that vulnerable residents are able to access appointments. A further report will be presented to Executive Cabinet after 12 months of operation with the results of the review.

**Background Information:**

<b>Appendix 1</b>	The consultation pack
<b>Appendix 2</b>	A full list of all the organisations contacted re consultation
<b>Appendix 3</b>	consultation survey results
<b>Appendix 4</b>	full equality impact assessment

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 The Customer Services function was suspended in March 2020 due to the Covid 19 pandemic and no face to face service 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. This has been beneficial and an improvement in service for many customers, who have received help with their enquiry without the need to make a journey. Previously no telephone service to complete a benefit application was available.
- 1.2 Almost two years 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.
- 1.3 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.
- 1.4 Consideration will be given to the work of the Tameside Poverty Truth Commission which explores peoples lived experience of the challenges faced around issues of poverty.
- 1.5 The review will also consider how the service has been delivered during the pandemic and how it could be transformed into a more bespoke and tailored offer to better meet customer needs in the future through a combination of digital, telephone and face to face.
- 1.6 A report was taken to Executive Cabinet on the 23 June 2021 detailing the case for a new face-to-face customer service offer and recommending that public consultation be undertaken to establish views on the proposed new customer services delivery model. Following this decision, public consultation commenced on the 28 June 2021 and closed on the 19 September 2021.
- 1.7 This report details the findings of the consultation and recommends a cost effective service for the future which meets customer needs and demand. The report also includes an updated Equalities Impact Assessment for the proposed changes to inform decision makers of any adverse impacts and how these are to be addressed.
- 1.8 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 with solely by the dedicated customer services staff face to face and by staff within Exchequer Services by telephone. Level 2 enquiries are to book, pay, request a service and verification of housing benefit and council tax documents.

## 2. SERVICE PRIOR TO AND DURING COVID 19

- 2.1 Prior to the pandemic face to face customer services was offered solely 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 alongside Level 2 enquires.
- 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 consists 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 over the phone by Customer Services Officers which is a new offer that was not available previously.
- 2.7 During the period 26 January 2021 and 15 November 2021, the Customer Services Officers provided 485 customers with assistance by telephone to complete housing benefit and council tax support applications.

### 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	Year	Number of visitors
2003/04	100,126	2012/13	71,262
2004/05	104,986	2013/14	62,440
2005/06	92,560	2014/15	43,325
2006/07	811,10	2015/16	32,682
2007/08	83,463	2016/17	31,411
2008/09	74,694	2017/18	38,020
2009/10	77,599	2018/19	32,236
2010/11	83,114	2019/20	32,359
2011/12	75,896		

- 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**

April 2019 – March 2020			
Type of enquiry	Level 1	Level 2	Total
Housing Benefit	6,096	6,037	12,133
Council Tax	4,580	4,584	9,164
Education Admissions		379	379
Adult Social Services		314	314
Blue Badges		4,188	4,188
Waste Management		1,545	1,545
Parking		274	274

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 staffed 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 web chat 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 applications, council tax billing, housing benefit appeals and overpayments 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**

Period	Web		Call Centre		Face to Face	
	Volume	Average Cost	Volume	Average Cost per contact	Volume	Average Cost per visit
2003/04	452,378	£0.45	303,511	£1.29	100,126	£8.57
2004/05	679,813	£0.30	314,602	£1.20	104,986	£8.46
2005/06	1,499,904	£0.14	275,555	£1.31	92,560	£8.92
2006/07	1,954,604	£0.07	225,516	£1.46	81,110	£9.23
2007/08	1,984,500	£0.06	272,043	£1.28	83,463	£9.07
2008/09	2,286,087	£0.05	219,804	£1.68	74,694	£9.90
2009/10	2,423,329	£0.05	211,957	£1.65	77,599	£8.70
2010/11	2,378,582	£0.04	197,061	£1.59	83,065	£7.96
2011/12	2,601,214	£0.01	170,532	£1.61	75,828	£7.62
2012/13	2,316,793	£0.02	180,135	£1.35	71,210	£6.08
2013/14	2,244,788	£0.02	166,957	£1.36	62,440	£5.55
2014/15	3,000,404	£0.01	165,369	£1.31	43,225	£7.48
2015/16	3,338,273	£0.01	179,001	£1.26	32,682	£10.52
2016/17	3,658,006	£0.01	156,055	£1.47	31,411	£7.68
2017/18	3,332,619	£0.01	121,061	£1.84	38,020	£5.92
2018/19	3,218,502	£0.01	104,912	£2.20	32,236	£6.00
2019/20	3,245,374	£0.01	96,461	£2.32	32,359	£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 almost two years 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 that 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 39,000 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 almost two years 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 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, being able to access again 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.
- 5.9 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.

- 5.10 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
- 5.11 The proposed service model for the future would be based on providing the most appropriate access channel, tailored in accordance 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:
- 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
  - not to re-open the expensive reactive drop in Customer Service centre based in Tameside One at Ashton in the previous format
- 5.12 There is no doubt that some customers may be more vulnerable and/or do need additional support to access 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.
- 5.13 Overall, the proposed new model would transform the customer services offer, taking into account peoples changing attitudes to accessing services whilst enhancing the previous model by the introduction of telephone appointments and retaining face to face in a tailored bespoke manner. By offering face to face on an appointment basis, this will negate the

requirement to queue up and wait to see a customer services officer at busy times, which will further benefit customers.

## **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 deliver 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.
- 6.4 The new model for face to face customer services in the Place Directorate 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 Public consultation on the potential future model for the delivery of customer services was undertaken for a 12 week period between 28 June and 19 September 2021, to seek views of those who have used the service when it was operational and any others who may have views before any decision was made on the future of the service.

### **Communications/Promotion**

- 7.2 The consultation was 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. Additionally the survey contained free format text boxes to seek more detailed views from responders.
- 7.3 The survey formed part of the Council's Big Conversation process, which allowed the results to be captured and evaluated in a consistent manner. The Big Conversation consultation is prominently publicised via the Council's website and the consultation pack was also available in paper format from all libraries. Posters promoting the consultation were also displayed in libraries with staff actively encouraging people to complete the questionnaire and express

their views. The consultation pack is included at **Appendix 1**.

7.4 The following channels were used to communicate to the public and wider stakeholders (including staff) that the consultation was taking place:

- Press release
- Tameside Council website
- Chief Executive's Brief
- Leaders blog
- Twitter
- Citizen – Summer 2021 edition
- Facebook
- Partnership Engagement Network
- Healthwatch Tameside
- Inequalities Reference Group
- Independent Advisory Group
- Information Ambassadors Network Mailing List

### **Engagement**

7.5 In addition to promotion through the above channels, the consultation was also promoted in other ways. These include via:

- Partnership Engagement Network workshop delivered on 1 July 2021 – a network of 390 contacts; public, patients, stakeholders, partners and voluntary and community sector
- Council departments where customer services had assisted their customers prior to Covid-19. Dedicated meetings arranged for those services that wished to express views
- All Council Assistant Directors and Service Unit Managers asking for their views and also that they circulate a link to the consultation to staff and service users
- Elected Members and MP's by way of a briefing note and link to the consultation

7.6 Staff in Customer Services and Libraries were encouraged to complete the survey so that their perspective could be included in the evaluation.

7.7 The consultation was shared via existing groups, networks and services including organisations that support people in protected characteristic groups. A full list of all the organisations contacted can be found at **Appendix 2**.

## **8. RESULTS AND FINDINGS FROM THE CONSULTATION**

8.1 The consultation ran from the 28 June to 19 September 2021. Analysis of the consultation is based on feedback from the on-line survey, email comments and engagement sessions that were undertaken. After the consultation closed, officers read each response and coded all comments received against a number of themes to be able to consider and respond appropriately.

### **Survey**

8.2 A total of 222 responses to the survey were received. The consultation survey results can be found at **Appendix 3** and the key findings are summarised below.

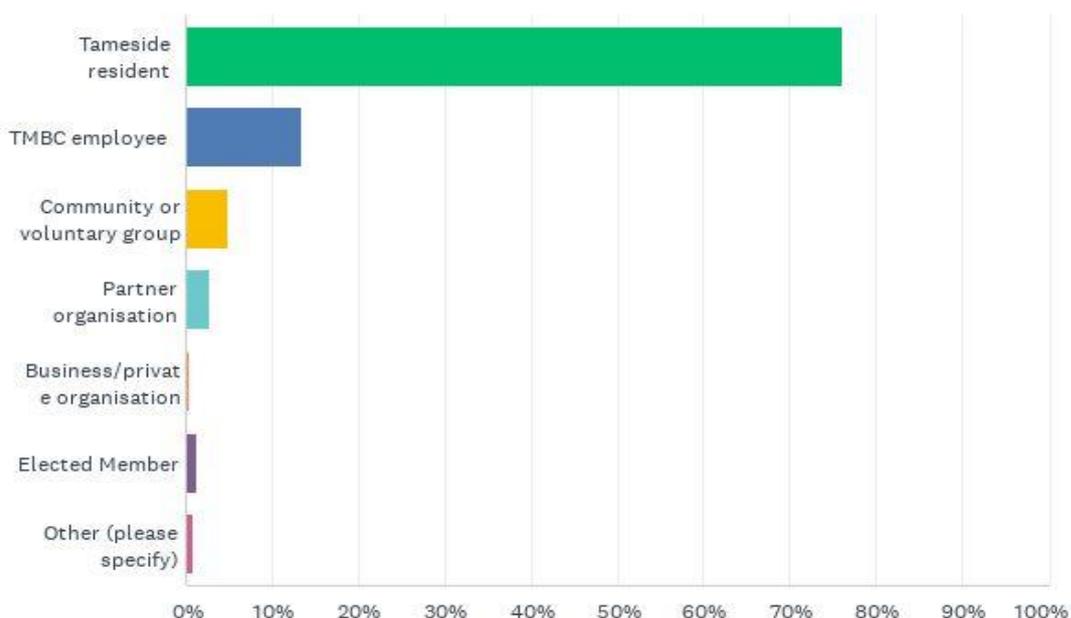
8.3 152 respondents answered the question regarding sex with 65.13% identifying as female, and 30.26% male. The remaining 4.61% of respondents stated they preferred not to say. This is different to the balance in the wider Tameside population (51% female, 49% male) and different to the customer services data held of previous customers (52.14% female, 47.86% male). During the consultation period, further promotion of the consultation was undertaken with men's community and voluntary organisations to encourage responses from this group; however, this group remains under-represented in the survey responses.

- 8.4 A quarter of survey respondents (25.17%) were aged between 30 - 44 years age which is a reasonably representative sample compared to the wider Tameside population of 19.39% and customer services data held of 31.29%.
- 8.5 Individuals in the older age bracket were over-represented in the sample with over a third (35.66%) of respondents indicating they were over 60 years of age, compared to 23.38% in the wider Tameside population. In comparison, customer service data held on previous users of the service indicated that 23.45% of customers were aged over 60 years of age.
- 8.6 With regard to ethnicity 132 people answered the question. Of these, the large majority 90.15% (119) classed themselves as White British, 1.52% classed themselves as Asian Bangladeshi and 1.52% of respondents classed themselves as Asian Pakistani. This is different to the balance of the wider Tameside population where 88% of residents identify as White British, 2% as Asian Bangladeshi and 2.2% as Asian Pakistani. Customer Services user data indicates that just 0.28% of its customers identified as Asian Bangladeshi and this group was therefore over represented in the survey results. As comparison however, 10.52% of customers to the service identified as Asian Pakistani and therefore further contact was undertaken during the consultation period with organisations representing BAME groups. Diversity Matters North West, Community Champions and Action Together were approached asking them to further promote the survey with their members to encourage responses.
- 8.7 149 people answered the question regarding whether their day-to-day activities were limited by a health problem or disability. Of these, 40.27% (60) stated that their activities were limited a little/a lot. This is higher than the wider Tameside population, which indicates that 21% people in Tameside have a disability that affects their day-to-day life.

**Key Findings from the Consultation**

**Question 1 – Tick the box that best describes your interest in this issue**

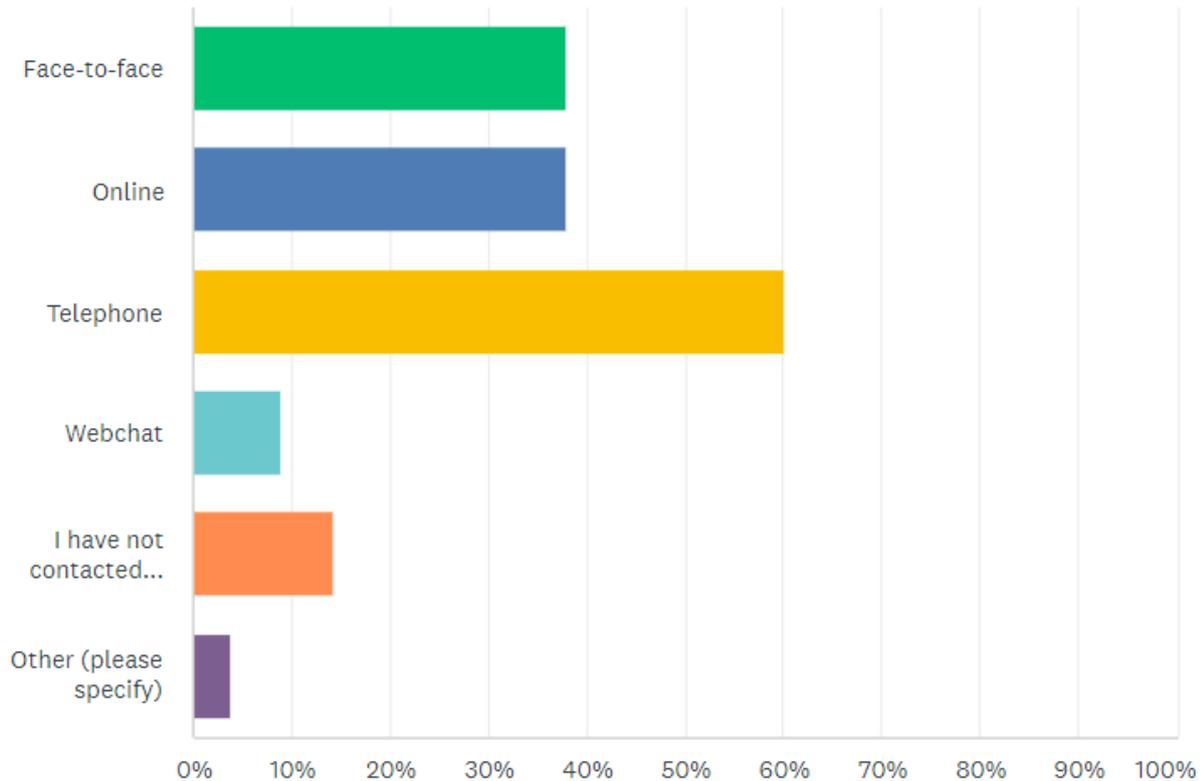
- 8.8 222 respondents answered this question with the majority of 76.13% (169) indicating that they were a Tameside resident, followed by 13.51% (30) identifying as a Tameside Council employee. The full breakdown of responses can be found in the graph below.



**Question 2 – How did you typically access customer services prior to Covid-19**

- 8.9 As a multi response question, respondents could tick more than one way by which they had previously accessed the service. Therefore, the total number of methods chosen is greater

than the 211 respondents that answered the question. 60.19% (127) indicated they had typically accessed customer services by telephone followed by on-line and face to face methods at 37.91% (80) in equal numbers. Details of all responses received can be seen in the graph below.



**Question 3 – why you chose the methods of contact in Q2**

8.10 Question 3 asked for comments by way of a free format text box as to why respondents had chosen the methods of contact indicated in Question 2. 145 comments were made and each response is grouped into themes based on their content and linked to each method of contact specified in Question 2. Some respondents provided comments which related to multiple methods of contact and therefore single comments may be counted more than once (eg under on-line and web chat). As such, the total comments grouped below in **Table 4** add up to more than the individual comments received.

**Table 4**

Method of contact	Comments grouped by themes
Telephone (94 comments)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• easy</li> <li>• more convenient</li> <li>• needed a quick answer</li> <li>• couldn't travel in to visit in person due to work</li> <li>• prefer to speak to a person</li> <li>• on-line methods not accessible</li> <li>• more personal service</li> <li>• get an immediate answer/quicker response</li> <li>• digital platforms complicated</li> <li>• website needs work</li> <li>• unable to go out</li> <li>• seems to be the only option to get things done</li> <li>• needed to clarify evidence for council tax</li> <li>• face to face difficult due to autism</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• more likely to get issue resolved</li> <li>• lack of digital skills/access to digital</li> </ul>
Face to face (58 comments)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• on-line not accessible</li> <li>• prefer to speak to a person</li> <li>• more personal service</li> <li>• location close to work</li> <li>• immediate answer to query/quicker response</li> <li>• unable to use remote methods due to disability i.e. hearing/sensory impairments</li> <li>• unable to use remote methods due to lack of digital skills or no internet</li> <li>• unable to use remote methods - homeless</li> <li>• telephone methods time consuming or too long to wait</li> <li>• better for complex enquiries</li> <li>• easier</li> <li>• more convenient</li> <li>• more likely to get issue resolved by speaking to a person</li> </ul>
On-line (58 comments)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• easier and more convenient</li> <li>• saves a trip out</li> <li>• not able to travel due to work</li> <li>• saves time</li> <li>• unable to go out</li> <li>• needed a quick answer</li> <li>• face to face difficult due to autism/anxiety</li> <li>• access to a translator tool due to language issues</li> </ul>
Other (12 comments)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The chosen method of contact depends on the enquiry</li> <li>• Cannot get an answer by telephone</li> <li>• No contact with anyone due to covid</li> <li>• Signposting people for help and support</li> </ul>
Web chat (11 comments)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ease of use</li> <li>• Convenient</li> <li>• Work full time</li> </ul>
Email (1 comment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to clarify details</li> </ul>

**Question 4 – Do you have access to the internet at home?**

8.11 Of the 162 respondents that answered this question, a considerable number of 93.21% (151) stated that they did have access to the internet at home using a computer/laptop or a mobile phone/tablet.

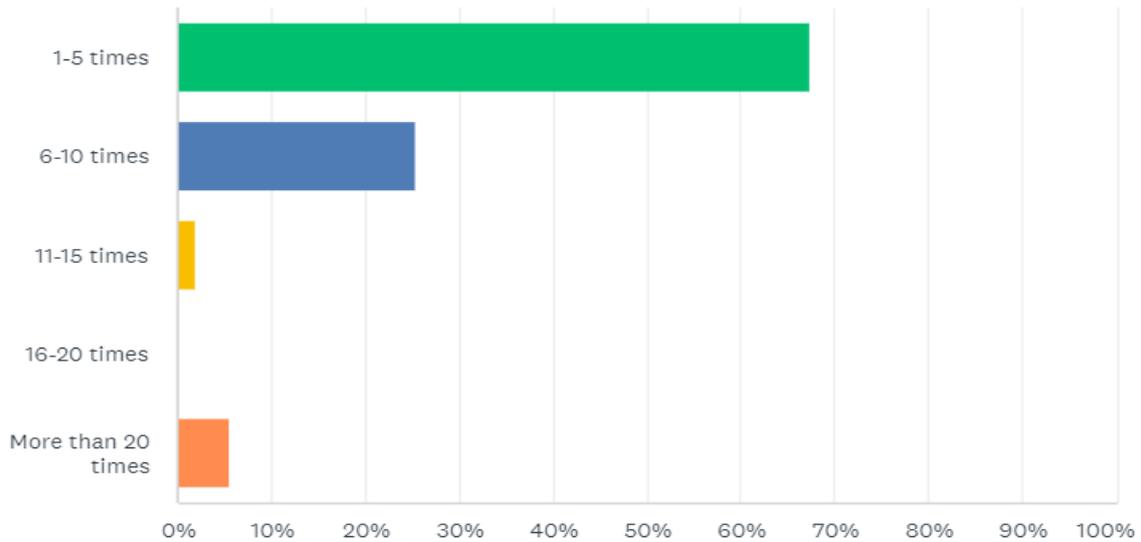
**Question 5 – Did you visit customer services in the previous 12 months prior to the Covid-19 pandemic?**

8.12 The next set of questions were asked to specifically ascertain whether, and how often, face to face customer services was used prior to the pandemic and the type of enquiries made.

8.13 160 respondents answered question 5 with just 37.5% (60) indicating that they had visited customer services in the 12 months prior to Covid-19.

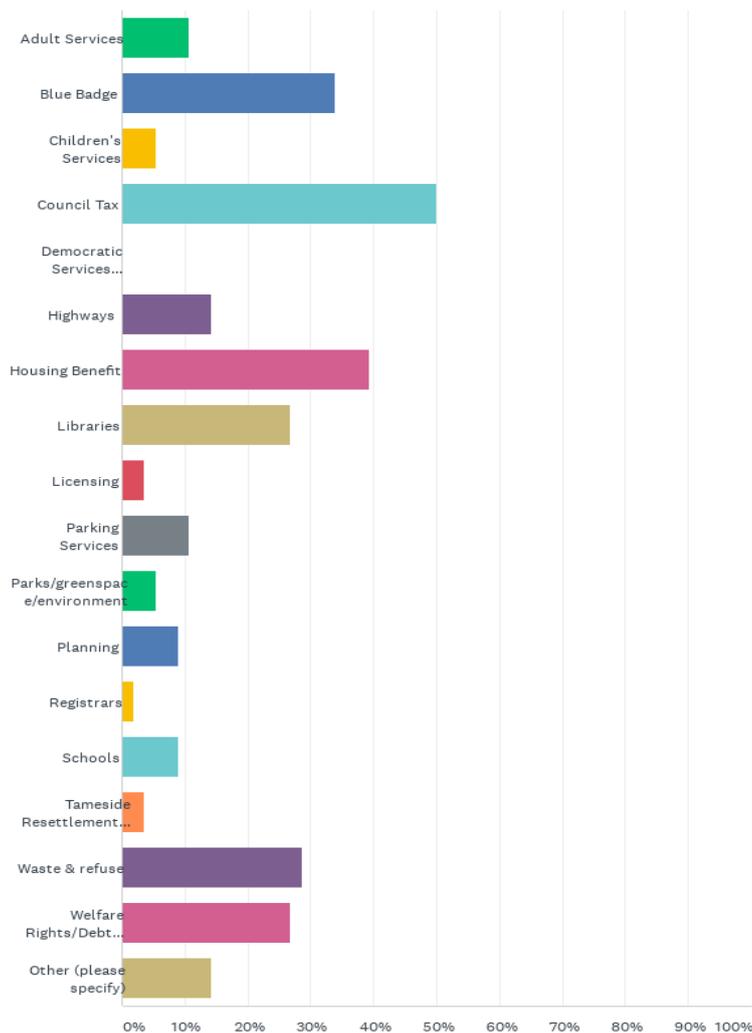
**Question 6 – How many times in the 12 month period prior to Covid-19 did you use face to face customer services?**

8.14 55 respondents answered question 6, with the majority of respondents 67.27% (37) indicating that they had used the face to face service between 1-5 times. The graph below details the full responses received.



**Question 7 – what were the reasons for your visit in the 12 months prior to Covid-19?**

8.15 As a multi response question, respondents were asked to tick all services they had used in the previous 12 months. 56 responders answered this question with the vast majority of enquiries in relation to housing and council tax benefit, these could be either level 1 or level 2 enquires. The remainder were enquiries that would be classified as level 2 type of enquiries. A total of 164 different types of enquiry were specified with the full breakdown detailed in the graph below.

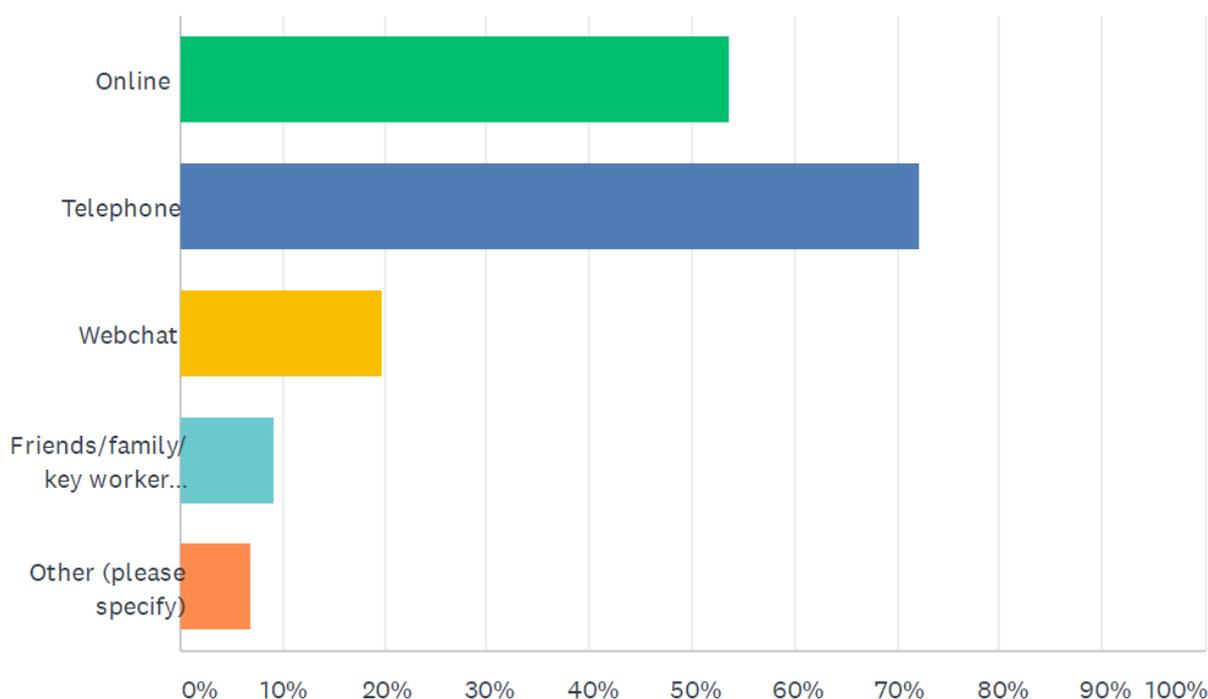


**Question 8 - Have you needed to access services or assistance from the Council since the beginning of the pandemic?**

8.16 These questions related to access to services or assistance from the Council since the start of the pandemic and the suspension of face to face customer services. Out of the 154 responders that answered this question, 57.79% (89) indicated that they had needed to access services or assistance from the Council since the start of the pandemic with 42.21% (65) indicating not.

**Question 9 - How have you accessed services or assistance from the Council since face to face customer services was suspended due to Covid-19?**

8.17 As a multi response question, respondents were asked to choose all channels used to contact the council since the start of the pandemic. Therefore, the total answer choices received add up to more than the number of respondents who answered the question. 86 people responded to the question with the majority of respondents 72.09% (62) indicating that they had accessed council services by telephone, followed by 53.49% (46) who had accessed on-line. The graph below indicates the full responses as to how people have accessed services since Covid-19.



**Question 10 – What was your experience of using these methods of contact (in Q9)?**

8.18 84 comments were received regarding the experience of their specific method of contact. As multiple methods of contact were chosen by respondents in question 9, some comments were considered multiple times i.e. under telephone and on-line. Therefore the total responses outlined in **Table 5** below is greater than the 84 comments received. Comments have been grouped into themes based on their content and related to each method of contact specified in question 9.

**Table 5**

Method of access and number of responses	Experience – common themes
Telephone (41)	Customers reported positive experiences whilst using the telephone including interaction with understanding and supportive staff. Others commented that their transaction was quick and easy. (19) However, some indicated that telephone access was not as helpful as

	face to face with some stating they had experienced long wait times, disconnection, problems hearing and some enquiries had not been fully resolved. (22)
Online (32)	<p>Respondents trying to access services online reported some issues which included customers experiencing difficulties finding the correct information and instances where information was out of date. Some indicated that they had struggled to access the service on-line and that it was not as helpful as face to face. (20)</p> <p>Others reported that they had found the on-line service user friendly, convenient, quick and easy. (12)</p>
Method of contact not stated (22)	<p>Some respondents provided comments without specifying how they had previously contacted the service.</p> <p>Many indicated that their interaction with the council had been a positive one (13) with a smaller number indicating that they needed a quicker response or that they did not get the help they needed. (9)</p>
Web chat (10)	<p>The majority of customers reported positive experiences using web chat, saying it was easy to use, quick and helpful. (7)</p> <p>A smaller number of respondents indicated that they had found it unhelpful, difficult to use and some commented on the time it took to resolve an enquiry. (3)</p>
Emails (3)	Long response times reported when communicating with the council by email (3)

8.19 Many of the comments in question 10 that referred to areas of improvement were repeated in questions 13 and 14 and are responded to within 8.25.

**Question 11 – When you contacted the Council to access services or assistance via the methods mentioned in Q9, was your query resolved?**

8.20 Overall, 48.28% (42) of respondents said that their enquiry had been resolved satisfactorily and a further 29.89% (25) stating the issue had been partly resolved/in the process of resolution. The remaining 28.74% (25) said that their query had not been resolved. As this was a multi-choice answer some respondents have ticked more than one option so the number of responses is greater than the 87 respondents who replied.

**Question 12 – Why were customer services unable to resolve your issue?**

8.21 Respondents were asked to provide comments in free text format to this question. Some respondents provided more than one reason as to why their issue was not resolved and therefore the total comments made was greater than the 39 responders who answered the question. The comments received have been considered and grouped into themes below.

- 19 respondents reported that their enquiry had not been fully resolved with people waiting for responses or waiting for the correct information to be received. Other comments related to system issues and lack of information being available. One person said that a food parcel could not be delivered
- 10 respondents commented that face to face customer services was important especially for vulnerable residents and two respondents had been unable to contact the service. Other comments related to Tameside One and access to libraries including concerns about confidentiality at the library counter. Others expressed concerns about removing drop-in and that elderly and vulnerable being less likely to arrange an appointment. One respondent commented how the autism community have been affected
- 7 respondents had poor experiences around getting through to the correct departments or speaking to correct people on web-chat. One person had difficulties speaking on another person's behalf and a further concern raised around pressures on library staff
  - 4 comments related to neighbour issues and Covid restrictions
  - 3 respondents did not know

**Open response questions 13 and 14. How the proposals will impact you/your family friends/other users of the service and any other comments you wish to make?**

- 8.22 Questions 13 and 14 were open text questions and were asked to give respondents the opportunity to respond to how the proposals would impact themselves or others (Q13). There was also an opportunity to make any additional comments about customer services (Q14).
- 8.23 A total of 142 respondents provided an answer to Question 13, and a further 91 respondents provided an answer to Question 14. The responses from both of these questions have been merged and classified by theme based on their content, in order to identify and fully analyse all of the issues identified. Some respondents provided comments that related to multiple themes and therefore these comments have been included under each relevant theme. As such, the total comments grouped below by theme add up to more than the individual comments received.
- 8.24 Comments received by email to the consultation have also been included within the table below and grouped by theme.
- 8.25 The following information is provided in **Table 6**:
- Short explanation of the theme (based on the comments made)
  - Number of comments (i.e. number of consultation returns that commented in that way).
  - The response to the concerns raised.

**Table 6**

<p><b>Question 13: Having read the proposals around how customer services may be delivered in the future, please explain how the proposals will impact you/your family/friends/other users of the service.</b></p> <p><b>Question 14: Please give any other comments you wish to make regarding customer services in Tameside in the box below</b></p>	
Consultation feedback theme	Tameside MBC Response
<p><b><u>Face to face still needed (60)</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some don't understand technology and are more comfortable face to face</li> <li>• Some need another person to accompany them regarding their enquiry</li> <li>• Things are explained better face to face</li> <li>• Some get anxious or are not good using the telephone</li> <li>• More personal service</li> <li>• Better for complex queries</li> <li>• Prefer face to face</li> <li>• Allows other issues to be explored that on-line does not allow for</li> </ul> <p>Ensure there are not long wait times for appointments. The face to face element needs to be easily accessible.</p>	<p>Face to face customer services will be retained and an appointment can be made to see a Customer Services Officer.</p> <p>Customer service can also be accessed by dropping into any library in the Borough where the majority of customer services enquiries can be handled. Library staff will also be able to access an appointment for those customers where that is the contact method required. This appointment could be either via telephone or face to face.</p> <p>Appointments will be organised to ensure that customers are seen promptly and staffing levels will</p>

<p>Some concerns that the service will not be as good and that more needs to be done.</p>	<p>be closely monitored to accommodate this. The new model will offer a range of ways to contact customer services with those people who need an appointment being offered one.</p>
<p><b><u>No impact (37)</u></b> No impact/no change for me.</p>	<p>This is evidence that the changes will be suitable for some customers</p>
<p><b><u>Vulnerable residents - access issues (36)</u></b> People with disabilities may have difficulties using telephone/on-line methods and will still need to access services face to face e.g. hearing/visual impairment, mental health, elderly. Some customers will be unable to access remote methods due to literacy issues.</p> <p>Concerns that any changes to the service could cause the vulnerable to slip through the net/cause stress.</p>	<p>There will always be some customers who have additional needs when needing to contact the Council. Digital, telephone, web chat and face to face will remain available with the most appropriate channel being utilised depending on a customer's requirements.</p> <p>Communication around how to access the service, especially the face to face channel will be particularly important. Vulnerable residents may need assistance to access services and both contact centre and library staff already provide this and will continue to do so in order to ensure all residents are able to access the services they need.</p> <p>The proposed new customer service model will be reviewed after 12 months of operation and closely monitored to ensure that vulnerable residents are able to access appointments.</p>
<p><b><u>Digital concerns (33)</u></b> Concerns about those people who are digitally excluded e.g. older people, people with no internet access or suitable device.</p> <p>Access to free internet in libraries limited to 1 hour. Few free wi-fi hotspots with suitable shelter in the Borough.</p> <p>An alternative model was suggested; make a number of PC's/tablets available on Level 1 at Tameside One with a Customer Service Officer on site to help customers digitally self-serve. The vulnerable not able to self-serve would then be identified and booked in for a face to face appointment</p>	<p>Free PC access is available at libraries if people are able to use digital means. Alternatively, telephone access is available and face to face appointments where this is the most appropriate contact channel for the customer.</p> <p>Although free internet is limited to 1 hour per day on library PCs, there is no limit should a resident wish to use their own device in the library to get on-line. For people using library PCs there are occasions where extra time can be offered e.g. job seeking. Library staff would be able to assist with helping people get on-line. Customers are also able to purchase additional internet time.</p> <p>There are a number of PC's available in the library on the ground floor of Tameside One. PC's are also available at all other libraries within the Borough. Library staff are able to assist customers to get onto a PC. If a person is not able to self-serve then a face to face or telephone appointment can be made via the library staff.</p> <p>Anyone wishing to sign up for Open+ access should go to their local library during staffed hours for a</p>

<p><b><u>General positive comments about the proposals (25)</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A more professional offer.</li> <li>• Easier to make contact locally. More people are using technology to access services</li> <li>• Retain Level 2 enquiries at libraries. Direct savings elsewhere</li> <li>• Proposals are ok, provided the vulnerable are identified and supported</li> </ul>	<p>quick induction and to be signed up.</p> <p>These comments are indicative of the effect the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the way that services are being accessed by some residents/customers. The proposed new model for customer services will include appointments by both telephone and face to face. This is an increased offer compared to how the service was delivered prior to the pandemic.</p> <p>Level 2 enquiries will be retained at all libraries and can be accessed by dropping in.</p> <p>Whilst it is still vital to ensure that everybody can access services by whichever channel is the most appropriate for individuals, it does demonstrate that other channels are sometimes suitable. There needs to be understanding that the channel of choice may change depending on the type of enquiry being made at any particular time.</p> <p>The most vulnerable will be supported to access the service and an appointment offered where this is deemed to be the most appropriate method of contact.</p>
<p><b><u>Triage/appointment booking process (16)</u></b></p> <p>Concerns about how people, especially the vulnerable will access an appointment.</p> <p>Ensure local services and libraries are promoted, as these may be an alternative method of help.</p> <p>Changes around how to request an appointment should be communicated and clearly advertised.</p> <p>The triage process should be clearly defined to ensure those who need an appointment are offered one.</p> <p>Professionals supporting a vulnerable resident should be able to request an appointment.</p> <p>Concerns over delays/wait times for an appointment and that this should not be a detriment to lose benefit due to start date of any required benefit claims.</p> <p>Some customers may have difficulties</p>	<p>Data from visits is captured and in 2019/20, pre – pandemic, nearly 66% of enquiries in customer services were level 2 in nature. Many of these enquiries can be dealt with immediately over the phone, web chat or email or in person at any library. For those residents who need an appointment, a triage process will operate. People can attend the library in person and request an appointment with customer services or can telephone the dedicated number. The triage will be delivered by customer services and communication around how to access an appointment will be particularly important. This will be cascaded through the council’s communication channels and via partner organisations/community groups. Libraries will also act as a communication channel to inform residents how they can access the service including arranging a face to face or telephone appointment where required.</p> <p>Professionals supporting vulnerable residents will be able to request an appointment on a person’s behalf.</p> <p>Processes will be in place to protect the start date of a claim. It is envisaged that if there is capacity on the day, either by telephone or by face to face</p>

<p>remembering future appointment dates.</p> <p>What happens over bank holidays/weekends?</p>	<p>that this would be facilitated.</p> <p>Should anyone struggle to remember an appointment date or time, arrangements can be made to remind a person prior to an appointment.</p> <p>The operating hours for the council are not changing under the new proposed model.</p>
<p><b><u>Telephone comments (15)</u></b></p> <p>Concerns that accessing the service by telephone is not an effective method with some enquiries not fully resolved and some calls not returned.</p> <p>There are long wait times.</p> <p>Some enquiries are too complex to deal with on the telephone.</p> <p>Concerns around the cost of accessing the service by telephone.</p>	<p>Through this consultation, it has transpired that many enquiries both before and during the pandemic have been dealt with effectively by telephone. Feedback from those who had previously accessed the service by telephone indicated it had been easy to use, convenient and saved making a journey especially for those with work commitments. However, it is evident that this is not the same experience for all. Calls to the council have taken longer to answer during Covid-19. The pandemic has had an unprecedented effect across many Council Services who have been required to take on new work streams such as business grants, self-isolation payments and support with food for those isolating. There have also been some staffing difficulties caused by officers isolating due to Covid and because of the HGV driver shortages in waste services.</p> <p>With regard to the complexity of enquiries, if this is the case a face to face appointment will be arranged, bookable by telephone or via the library.</p> <p>The new model will offer a range of ways to contact customer services with those people who need an appointment being offered one. These will be arranged either face to face or by telephone with the service making the call to the customer so that cost is not incurred. Appointments can be accessed via email or by visiting any library.</p>
<p><b><u>On-line comments (13)</u></b></p> <p>Concerns raised about accessing services on-line. Some felt better technology was needed i.e. updates via bin app and better use of social media for updating residents.</p> <p>Investment needed in the website and online services to update it and make it more user oriented. Some of the on-line support options do not always support the query. Reduce response times.</p>	<p>The Tameside and Glossop Digital Strategy was approved by Cabinet in September 2020 and includes a 5 year vision with specific actions that will improve digital accessibility of services. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The development of a single economy wide digital front door offering online public services that are joined up, user-friendly and make sense</li> <li>• A new single virtual Call Centre for all Council services with new features such as web chat and automation</li> <li>• The use of new and emerging technology and Artificial Intelligence to deliver better services and smarter, tailored digital</li> </ul>

	<p>interactions</p> <p>It is recognised that delivery on this strategy will be required in order to improve digital access.</p>
<p><b><u>Council budgets and buildings (13)</u></b>  Concerns were expressed about the cost of building Tameside One when cutting the face to face service.</p> <p>Some concerns made around cuts to services whilst raising Council Tax.</p> <p>Some concerns raised around privacy in libraries if discussing private/personal matters at the counter.</p>	<p>The Tameside One building remains open to the public for the library service and other partners continue to operate out of the building i.e. Jobcentre Plus, CAB. It is proposed that in the future, appointments for Customer Services will also be in the Tameside One building.</p> <p>Since 2010, funding from central government to local government has on average reduced by half in real terms. At the same time, the Council has faced growing cost pressures from increasing demand for services and rising costs. In the last seven years alone, the Strategic Commission has needed to find budget savings of £171 million to balance the books. The Council continues to face significant cost pressures from demographic growth and increased costs. Funding from Central Government continues to reduce in real terms and does not keep up with increased costs facing the Council due to increased demand and general increases in costs due to inflation. The 2021/22 Local Government Finance settlement had a headline 4.5% increase in core spending power but only 0.5% of this reflected additional funding. Most of the increase in spending power (4%) was based on an assumption from Central Government that Local Government would increase Council Tax by the maximum amount possible.</p> <p>Libraries have always offered help with level 2 enquiries at the counter. If a customer feels that their enquiry is of a confidential nature, a face to face or telephone appointment can be requested with customer services.</p>
<p><b><u>Drop in still required (9)</u></b>  Some respondents indicated there is still a need for drop in without the need to book an appointment.</p>	<p>Any customers, including our more vulnerable residents, can drop into any library for a face to face service for a level 2 type enquiry.</p> <p>If a customer requires a face to face appointment with customer services then this can be arranged.</p>
<p><b><u>General comments on the consultation exercise (8)</u></b>  Concerns raised about access to the survey for those digitally excluded.</p>	<p>Posters were issued to all libraries to display during the consultation period. Library staff had paper copies of the questionnaire available if people needed a printed version. For customers who could use digital methods, library staff assisted customers on library PC's by uploading the link to the questionnaire on survey monkey. Various</p>

<p>Comments made around having a better understanding of customer needs and feedback to develop the service.</p> <p>Concerns about staff retaining jobs</p>	<p>community organisations and groups were contacted to promote the survey with people they support and a full list of these groups can be found at <b>Appendix 2</b>. All responses from the survey have been considered in order to fully understand views before implementing any changes.</p> <p>The data collected by the service has been analysed and considered as part of this consultation. This has included the numbers of visitors each year along with the type of enquiries that customers have presented with.</p> <p>No staff will lose their jobs as part of the proposed new service model.</p>
<p><b><u>Positive comments about customer services (7)</u></b></p> <p>Positive comments were received regarding the face to face Customer Services citing it as excellent and supportive with customers happy with the help provided.</p>	<p>Customer Services staff are extremely committed, knowledgeable and professional and it is pleasing to receive positive feedback through this consultation.</p>
<p><b><u>People should have a choice of contact method (6)</u></b></p> <p>Customers should be able to choose the best method of contact for them with a mix of options for contact kept.</p>	<p>All channels will be retained in the proposed new Customer Services delivery model. A discussion will take place during triage with the customer to establish the channel that best suit their needs. This may change depending on the type of enquiry at any particular time.</p>
<p><b><u>Strain elsewhere in the council (5)</u></b></p> <p>Concerns raised that other methods of contact could be put other services under more strain i.e. call centre/libraries.</p>	<p>Libraries have for many years dealt with Level 2 enquiries and will be able to accommodate any additional enquiries to the service. During the Covid 19 pandemic previous face to face customers have accessed services via other channels including telephone and an increase in calls in certain services will have been experienced. Should any increases become unsustainable resources would need to be considered.</p>
<p><b><u>Equalities comments (5)</u></b></p> <p>Some comments made related to equalities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure the service is approachable and inclusive and meets their needs</li> <li>• It can be more difficult to access services for BSL/ language issues/ visually impaired</li> <li>• Hearing loop suggested</li> <li>• Information that libraries give out needs to be in a suitable format for the visually impaired</li> <li>• Not everyone understands and communicates in English</li> </ul>	<p>The Council is mindful that some customers have additional needs when contacting to access services. Digital, telephone, web chat and face to face will remain available with the most appropriate channel being utilised depending on a customer's requirements.</p> <p>Hearing loops are available in libraries and customer services.</p> <p>If a customer had difficulty with a particular print format the library would look to enlarge font size, change the colour or look for online versions if the</p>

	<p>customer is able to use any online accessibility tools. If these options were not appropriate then the library would contact the “owner” of the information to see what alternative suitable formats might be available.</p> <p>For those customers whose first language is not English, we would request that they bring someone with them to assist in their appointment. Otherwise, suitable interpretation services can be organised.</p>
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### **Engagement Sessions**

- 8.26 Due to changing national and local Covid-19 social distancing restrictions, all engagement took place through virtual sessions.
- 8.27 A total of 3 engagement sessions were undertaken and a summary of discussions and key themes arising from these sessions are outlined below.

### **Partnership Engagement Network**

- 8.28 The Partnership Engagement Network (PEN) was established as part of a multi-agency approach to provide public and partners with an identified and structured method to influence the work of public services and to proactively feed in issues and ideas.
- 8.29 On 1 July 2021 representatives from Tameside Council, NHS Tameside and Glossop Clinical Commissioning Group and Tameside and Glossop Integrated Care NHS Foundation Trust along with public, stakeholders, partners, and voluntary, community and faith sectors came together for the second virtual PEN Conference of 2021. There were around 60 participants in total.
- 8.30 A facilitated workshop took place at the conference to gain views on the review of customer services and the proposed new model. Along with feedback from 6 workshop participants, key points were also communicated to the wider conference participants (60) during the conference. The key points from the workshop are provided below:
- No recorded problems amongst clients with being able to access customer services since the face to face service closed
  - People have dealt fairly well with online although some in-depth queries might be more difficult to solve using online methods
  - Offer of call-back appointments is good
  - Use of local library is a good option for those who cannot travel as easy
  - Will need better and simpler communication on the different ways people can access customer services
  - Consider those with a disability; including those who are deaf, visually impaired, learning disabled and language barriers for those people whom English is not their first language. Some may have support workers who can help, and the library is also still accessible
  - Consider how older people will be able to access services
  - Digital access – not digitally connected due to lack of IT skills or for financial reasons, no access to a phone or tablet, vulnerability. Some charities can provide access to laptops. Note scamming and fraud could be an issue if more remote delivery of the service
  - More methods of contact proposed than prior to Covid and as face to face been closed for 18 months, then the more natural way to go

### **Tameside MBC Exchequer Service**

- 8.31 The largest number of customers presenting at customer services has always been in respect of housing benefit and council tax. Therefore, specific consultation was undertaken with the Exchequer Service who carry out this core function to make sure all aspects were fully considered. The Exchequer Service also oversees the financial assessment function for customers receiving assessed social care, although evidence suggests that only a small number (around 3 per week) require assistance with the form.
- 8.32 The COVID 19 pandemic has had an unprecedented effect across many Council Services and particularly Exchequer Services who have been required to take on new work streams as a result of the pandemic. This has included business grants, self-isolation payments and council tax support hardship monies, all of which are continuing in the current financial year and require considerable resource.
- 8.33 Although a wealth of information, self-service and on-line forms are available on the Councils website, the Exchequer service continues to face significant demands in terms of customer contact at around 13,786 telephone contacts and 10,331 email contacts each month. The website traffic for this service averages around 116,642 hits each month.
- 8.34 Many residents have contacted Exchequer by telephone, email or sought information via the Councils website during the pandemic and will continue to contact in the same way now that restrictions are easing, it is likely that the most vulnerable and who may be elderly and digitally excluded are those most in need of face to face services. That said, many elderly residents are becoming increasingly digitally enabled, and many have mobile phones and/or may have family or friends to assist with claims for benefits. However support with form completion pertaining to their unique circumstances can often still be required. This extends to individuals in receipt of an assessed care need who are required to complete a financial assessment form are perhaps also likely to require support with the form either by telephone or face-to-face.

### **Other Tameside MBC Services**

- 8.35 Consultation with internal services with regard to the proposed customer services model was undertaken to establish if any issues were perceived in terms of receiving information from customers in order to deliver their services. Whilst it must be remembered that this is the service's perspective and would not necessarily be reflected in the customers perspective, the consultation was undertaken to obtain a complete picture and identify any impact from all parties. Services consulted were Waste Services, Environmental Health, Greenspace and Engineering who all indicated no adverse impacts if the proposed changes are adopted as the vast majority of contact for these services is made by channels other than face to face.
- 8.36 Tameside MBC Education Admissions service provided feedback on the proposals. The admissions team report that they handle around 500 telephone calls per month and are happy to discuss school admissions or bus passes with families. If parents require a face to face appointment, then this would be arranged and therefore the view is the proposed changes should not impact customers to that service.
- 8.37 Consultation was undertaken with Ashton library management staff as this service has experienced an increase in customers visiting the library with enquiries that would previously have been made to Customer Services. Although libraries have for many years dealt with Level 2 enquiries, prior to Covid 19 most people attended the Customer Service Centre with these types of enquiries rather than Ashton library due to its close proximity in the building. The suspension of the face to face Customer Service Centre has also served to widen the variety of enquiries to the library service. To assist library staff to be able to effectively respond to the uplift in these different types of enquiries, additional support has been put in place from trained Customer Service Officers.
- 8.38 The library has also seen a number of people enquiring about partner organisations such as

Citizen's Advice Bureau and Cashbox Credit Union. Service information cards have been made available to issue to customers who wish to speak with these organisations. Citizens Advice will be implementing face to face appointments in the near future. The library service continues to record all enquiries and these are being closely monitored to enable further support for staff to be arranged if necessary.

## **9. REFINING THE CUSTOMER SERVICES DELIVERY MODEL**

- 9.1 The consultation undertaken was to gain feedback on a proposed new Customer Service model and to use these views to shape the service for the future ensuring it meets resident's needs.
- 9.2 The proposed new model for the delivery of customer services promotes a digital first model, encouraging residents to self-serve if they are able. A bespoke supported service offer over the telephone, web chat and email would be offered to assist customers unable to self-serve and where it is identified that more detailed assistance is required a telephone appointment would be offered. Face to face service would be available where appropriate and 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.
- 9.3 The proposed new model should also consider the work being undertaken by the Tameside Poverty Truth Commission (PTC) which launched on 9 November 2021. This saw community commissioners sharing lived experience of challenges they had faced around issues of poverty. Whilst this is its infancy and more learning will come to the fore as the PTC develops, currently indications are that a smooth customer journey is imperative to ensure people aren't passed between services as this exacerbates poverty and crisis. Any future feedback from the PTC will be considered and used to improve the customer services model going forward but in the meantime the appointment and triage process through both libraries and customer services will be particularly important in ensuring that people are supported effectively and in a timely manner with their enquiry.
- 9.4 Whilst 93.21% of respondents to the survey indicated that they had access to the internet at home using a suitable device, a small number of comments were received around contacting the council digitally and improvements being required to enhance the customer experience. These issues will need to be addressed in order to offer excellent service to customers and particularly in a model which promotes digital first. A number of respondents did however comment that on-line was easier and more convenient, particularly for people working as it could be done at any time of the day.
- 9.5 Responders to the survey indicated that telephone was the most used way of contacting the Council for services both before and since the start of the pandemic. Some respondents who had chosen this method of contact stated that they had done so because it was easier, quick and less effort than making a journey for face to face contact.
- 9.6 However, a few comments were cited as an issue for telephone contact including wait times, some enquiries not fully resolved with calls not returned. Wait times for calls to be answered has been an issue in some services caused by increased call volumes due to the pandemic, staff being affected by Covid themselves or having to self-isolate which impacted on service delivery and more recently the lack of HGV drivers impacting on the refuse collection service.
- 9.7 From the consultation it is clear that for a new model to be successful face to face customer service should be retained. Consultation responders cited this need for a number of reasons including individual vulnerability/disability, digital exclusion whether due to age or availability of devices/broadband, complexity of enquiry and the need to be accompanied by another. Responders also stated that customers should be able to exercise a choice in how they wish to access the service.

- 9.8 There were concerns raised around how people, especially the vulnerable will access an appointment and how the triage will operate to ensure nobody slips through the net. It was also recognised that professionals supporting vulnerable customers should be able to request an appointment on a person's behalf.
- 9.9 Currently the service is being delivered remotely with some customers attending the library for level 2 enquiries. Telephone appointments for housing benefit and council tax support claim forms is being provided through customer services, with approximately 15 claims being made each week. The customer services officers assisting with these enquiries are of the view that around 25% of customers assisted would have benefited from a face to face appointment had this been available.
- 9.10 Taking into account all of the consultation responses received it is proposed that the new customer services model would be based on providing a range of access channels to meet customers' requirements, bespoke to their needs and personal preference choice. The proposed model would be:
- 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 and this will form part of the communication plans
  - 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
  - Customers that need an appointment will be supported to access this via libraries or people can directly contact the service by telephone or email. The triage and appointment booking service will be promoted through the council's communication channels, through libraries and via community groups/partner organisations
  - Professionals supporting a vulnerable customer will be able to book an appointment on a person's behalf
- 9.11 The triage and appointment booking process for either a telephone or face to face appointment will be administered via Customer Services. Customers will be able to access the triage and appointment booking process in a number of ways; by directly telephoning customer services, via any library or by email. Referrals will also continue to be taken from other services such as the council's Exchequer service for those customers who require an appointment. Professionals supporting vulnerable customers will also be able to request an appointment on a person's behalf. It is envisaged that any face to face appointments will take place at Tameside One in Ashton.
- 9.12 The triage process will ensure that customers are able to discuss their issue with a member of customer services staff and agree the most suitable method to provide advice and assistance. Appointments will be organised to ensure that customers are seen promptly and staffing levels will be closely monitored to accommodate this. To ensure that customers are not disadvantaged if they are making a new claim for benefit, processes will be in place to protect the start date of any claim.

## **10. STAFF IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 The previous customer service model was delivered by 7.49 FTE. Four officers equivalent to 3.19 FTE have recently left the service and have not been replaced. This has left 4.3 FTE

officers in the service which is estimated would be sufficient to deliver the new proposed service model.

- 10.2 Officers have been briefed and consulted for their views regarding how the new model may operate. Additionally they were also encouraged to complete the survey to enable their views to be captured and analysed along with other survey responders. Formal consultation will need to be undertaken with staff and unions around the changes and implementation of the proposed new model.

## **11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 The proposed service model generates an annual saving of £0.051m part year in 2021/22 increasing to £0.097m annually from 2022/23 and recurrently thereafter. This results from reducing staffing levels and operating a self-serve model with support options via telephone, web chat and face-to-face appointments.
- 11.2 The savings will be achieved by not replacing the officers that have already left the service and their posts being deleted.
- 11.3 These savings would contribute to the overall savings allocation for the Place directorate of £2.777m in 2021/22 increasing to £3.998m by 2024/25.
- 11.4 Members should note that the savings realised by this proposed new delivery model currently assumes that there will be no additional investment required in any related appointment booking systems (as referenced in section 14.5). 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.

## **12. IMPLEMENTATION**

- 12.1 Should the proposed new service model be implemented, communication with residents and potential service users would be required. Publicity would be undertaken through the council's communication channels including libraries, social media and the council website. Partner organisations such as registered housing providers, community and voluntary sector via Action Together and internal networking groups such as the Information Ambassador Network would be asked to assist in circulating information on the new service provision. The publicity campaign would provide details on how customers can access services including on-line, telephone and face to face.
- 12.2 It is proposed that the new service model would be implemented with effect from the 14 March 2022.
- 12.3 There will be a reporting mechanism in place within the service to raise any feedback, concerns or issues relating to the triage and/or appointment booking system. This will enable any measures or changes to be implemented at the earliest stage to ensure that vulnerable residents are able to access the service.

## **13. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

- 13.1 A full equality impact assessment has been undertaken on the consultation process and how the proposed changes to face to face Customer Services might impact on customers and particularly those with a recognised protected characteristic. The full equality impact assessment can be found at **Appendix 4**.

- 13.2 It is not proposed to remove the face to face customer service facility, but to replace the reactive drop in service with an appointment system delivered either by telephone or face to face.
- 13.3 Whilst there may be some potential negative impact on protected characteristic groups, mitigation measures have been identified within the EIA to minimise this. There were specific concerns raised around elderly and vulnerable residents being unable to use digital or telephone channels and would still require face to face customer service. Other comments related to how the new model would be communicated to ensure people knew how to access the service and how triage would operate to ensure vulnerable people did not slip through the net. In order to ensure this doesn't happen, the new service model will be well communicated to ensure those residents who are unable to use digital or telephone methods due to disability, age or vulnerability are able to access a face to face service. Appointments will be bookable in person via libraries, by email or by directly telephoning customer services. Professionals supporting vulnerable customers will also be able to request an appointment on a person's behalf.
- 13.4 The proposed new customer service model and in particular the triage and appointment booking system, will be kept under review to ensure quality of service and closely monitored to ensure that vulnerable residents are able to access an appointment.

#### **14. RISKS**

- 14.1 Concerns were raised in the consultation around how the new service model would be communicated and how appointments would be accessed.
- 14.2 Communication around how to access an appointment will be particularly important. This will be cascaded through the council's communication channels and via partner organisations/community groups. Libraries will also act as a communication channel to inform residents how they can access the service including arranging a face to face or telephone appointment where required.
- 14.3 Appointments will be accessible through libraries, by telephoning a dedicated number or by email. The appointments will be booked via a triage process and delivered directly by Customer Services. It is envisaged that a discussion with the customer will take place during triage to establish the channel of access that best suits the customer needs. This method of access may change for the customer depending on the type of enquiry at any particular time.
- 14.4 Appointments will be organised to ensure that customers are seen promptly and staffing levels will be closely monitored to accommodate this. This will be particularly important to ensure that residents maximise any potential entitlement to housing benefit and/or council tax support. Processes will be in place to protect the start date of a claim and it is envisaged that if there is capacity on the day that someone presents for an appointment, then this would be facilitated.
- 14.5 A booking system will be required in order to operate on an appointment basis. A system was developed some years ago, although not currently used, and this is being evaluated with a view to bringing it back into use should the proposed service model be implemented. If this system proves unsuitable then further consideration will need to be given to how appointments will be managed.
- 14.6 Whilst it is unknown what the demand will be for face to face appointments, it is felt that 4.3 FTE staff would be sufficient to manage the new service model and staffing levels will be kept under review.
- 14.7 Members should note that whilst savings are being made in customer services, there could

be impact if work increases in other areas of the council as a result of the proposed changes to the service. It will be difficult to monitor if any potential workload increases elsewhere could be directly attributed to the proposed new customer service model, however this will be kept under review as far as possible.

## **15. CONCLUSION**

- 15.1 Although there is a still a demand for traditional face to face customer service, this is reducing over time with technological advances and therefore change to the service must be made to ensure it is affordable and efficient going forward. Additionally, Covid-19 has brought about an abrupt and enforced change in how customer services is offered, requiring customers to very quickly become familiar with accessing services via other channels
- 15.2 Face to face customer services has been suspended for almost two years due to the pandemic. During this time, people have accessed the service mainly by telephone and through on-line methods. Respondents to the survey indicated that in the 12 months prior to Covid they had mainly accessed the service by telephone. Continued use of these methods of contact should be encouraged when accessing services in the future rather than reverting back to reliance on face to face services.
- 15.3 Since the start of the pandemic, customer services appointments have been delivered by telephone. It is estimated that around 25% of customers assisted during this period would have benefited from a face to face appointment.
- 15.4 The consultation responses overwhelmingly support that face to face customer service be retained under any new model. It is therefore proposed that a new customer service delivery model should encourage, promote and support self-serve 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. Telephone appointments would be a feature in the model along with face to face appointments for those who require this. A triage and appointment booking process would support the new model and be communicated as set out in 12.1.
- 15.5 Overall, the proposed new model would transform the customer services offer, taking into account peoples changing attitudes to accessing services and it would enhance the previous model by the introduction of telephone appointments whilst still retaining face to face in a tailored, bespoke manner. By offering face to face on an appointment basis this will negate the requirement to queue up and wait to see a customer services officer at busy times which will further benefit customers.
- 15.6 It is proposed to keep this model under review and make any further adjustments as necessary to ensure quality of service, that it meets customer demand and that vulnerable residents are able to access appointments, whilst at the same time being affordable and cost effective. A further report will be presented to Executive Cabinet after 12 months of operation with the results of the review.

## **16. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 16.1 As set out at the front of the report