

Report to Leader of the Council

Subject: Council Service Changes Due to COVID-19 – Restricted Access to the Civic Centre

Date: 24 March 2020

Author: Acting Chief Executive

Wards Affected

All

Purpose

For the Leader of the Council to authorise, until further notice:

The restriction of access by the public to the Civic Centre building, except for emergency appointments which must be conducted face to face.

To update the Leader as to the current public access arrangements that our partner organisations in the Civic Centre have put in place and to update the Leader as to how public services can be delivered without face to face contact where appropriate.

Key Decision

This is a key decision as it is likely to have significant impact on residents living in two or more wards.

Recommendations

That the Leader of the Council:

- 1) Authorises, until further notice, a restriction on public access to the Civic Centre, Arnot Hill Park, Arnold Nottingham, other than for emergency face to face appointments as detailed in this report.

1 Background

- 1.1 Following on from the recent measures announced by the by government in relation to isolation during the Covid -19 pandemic, and the closure of the Council's Leisure and Community centres, children's play facilities and cafes, it is now necessary to further review how Council operations and buildings are run. In particular it is necessary to consider what face to face contact with the public is necessary in the Council's Civic Centre at the current time where the public are being told to remain in their homes except for work where it is not possible to work from home, fetching essential food and medical supplies and exercise once a day.
- 1.2 To date, the Council's reception at the Civic Centre has remained open to the public with no restrictions placed on access and extra precautions put in place in terms of the provision of hand sanitiser and advice to staff on hygiene. Partner organisations within the Civic Centre have taken steps to limit contact with the public. Gedling Homes are no longer accepting visitors to the Civic Centre and the Department of Work and Pensions are only permitting emergency face to face appointments with most customer contact being done by phone. The Citizen's Advice Bureau, who also occupy part of the Civic Centre have also stopped face to face contact with customers.
- 1.2 The Council needs to protect residents and staff and take whatever steps are necessary to support government measures on social distancing to reduce the risk of Covid-19 spreading further. Having considered face to face interactions which currently occur at the Civic Centre, the majority of services can be delivered without the need for face to face contact. Staff have already found ways to deliver services differently, for example, housing benefit checks will now be delivered remotely, without the requirement to check hard copy documents from individuals, the majority of Council tax and other Housing Benefit queries and payments can be dealt with over the phone or online, as can planning enquiries, public protection enquiries, waste, recycling and PASC queries, building control and elections queries. The services currently provided by Gedling on behalf of the County Council, such as blue badge applications, can also be dealt with remotely via the phone or online. In reality, following on from government instructions to isolate, it is unlikely that the public will continue to visit the Civic Centre in any event. However, there will still be occasions, for example in respect of emergency Housing Need matters that the public may still wish to come to the Civic Centre. The Council does therefore need to facilitate access to the public in limited emergency situations.
- 1.3 It is recognised that at present the Council cannot prohibit public access altogether to the Civic Centre, where there is an emergency need to visit, however, in order to protect its residents and staff, and support government isolation measures, the Council is looking at measures that

will minimise face to face contact with the public during the Covid-19 epidemic and also reduce the possibility for members of the public to congregate in areas such as the Civic Centre reception which could increase the risk of exposure to Covid -19.

2 Proposal

- 2.1 It is proposed that from close of business on 24 March 2020, the Civic Centre be closed to the public save for emergency visits and pre-booked appointments which have to be conducted face to face.
- 2.2 In order to enforce this restriction, it is proposed that various measures are put in place to facilitate a triage system for those turning up at the building so an assessment can be made of their needs. It is also proposed that appropriate communications are put in place with the public to notify them of the restricted access giving clear direction as to how services can be accessed.
- 2.3 Restricting public access to the Civic Centre will also restrict access to the Council's payment kiosk. All payments through the kiosk can be made to the Council in other ways. It is proposed that alternative payment methods be communicated to the public to ensure that any payments to the Council are taken by alternative methods.

3 Alternative Options

- 3.1 An alternative option is for operations to continue as normal with no restriction on public access to the Civic Centre. The government is clear that social distancing measures are necessary to protect the public. The Council has a responsibility to its residents and staff to ensure that they remain healthy and safe and wherever possible to limit face to face contact. These measures, although severe are considered absolutely necessary at the current time to reduce social contact in the Civic Centre and to endorse government's measures. They will be kept under review.

4 Financial Implications

- 4.1 Closure of the Civic Centre will mean there will be payments to the Council that can no longer be made via the kiosk. Although such payments can be made in other ways it is likely that not everyone will have the ability to use other methods of payment, this could potentially result in non-payment, or a delay to payment of some services and bills. The kiosk takes an average of £136,000 each month, for a range of payments which include Council Tax.

5 Equality Impact

- 5.1 There are positive impacts on employees in respect to disability, age, and gender. Employees in these groups will be protected from unnecessary exposure to the viral infection through the policy decision proposed.
- 5.2 There will be negative impacts on a range of service users who fall within the protected characteristics of disability and potentially age due to the reduced opportunity to participate in activities. Other than the equality impacts identified the equality impacts are neutral. No further actions are recommended as a result of this equality impact review.

6 Appendices

- 6.1 None

6 Background Papers

- 6.1 No specific background papers have been identified but government guidance at <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response> has been relied on.

7 Reasons for Recommendations

- 7.1 To take proportionate action in relation to the current COVID-19 pandemic aimed at protecting the residents of the Borough and Council staff and to ensure that social contact is kept to an absolute minimum at the Civic Centre whilst still maintaining essential public services.