

Report to Portfolio Holder for Resources and Reputation

Subject: Changes in service delivery for Customer Services

Date: 2nd August 2021

Author: Head of Governance and Customer Services

Wards Affected:

All

Purpose

To seek approval for changes in service delivery for Customer Services. In particular; approval for the removal of the kiosk provision from the reception area in response to a reduction in use and to support service efficiency, and, to change the provision of customer services from the fixed location at Carlton Hub to a mobile outreach service delivered at various locations throughout the borough.

Key Decision

This is not a key decision.

Recommendation(s)

THAT the Portfolio Holder:

1. Approves the cessation and removal of the kiosk service in the Civic Centre reception area.
2. Approves the change in the delivery of customer services from the fixed location at Carlton Hub to a more mobile outreach service delivered at various locations across the borough as detailed in this report.

1.1 Throughout the Covid19 pandemic, customer services have continued to operate effectively, and in fact performance targets have been surpassed particularly in relation to call response rates which have exceeded the 94% target throughout the pandemic. Staff have adapted to working at home and whilst cover is still provided in the Civic Centre, a new appointment based system has enabled customers to be seen in a timely fashion without unnecessary queuing and entry to the building. This has also enabled staff to be more organised in their approach to service delivery ensuring sufficient office cover to manage appointments and “drop-ins” whilst allowing a more agile approach for staff.

1.2 The Kiosk

The payment Kiosk, situated in the reception area of the Civic Centre was closed at the start of the pandemic when the Civic Centre sadly closed its doors to customers other than in emergency situations. As the Civic Centre reopened on an appointment only basis, the kiosk remained closed, not least because of the touch screen and cleaning requirements necessary to ensure reduced risk of infection, but also because payments of cash/card and cheque through the kiosk could be managed in other ways.

1.3 The kiosk was originally installed in 2014 as a method of minimising the impact of the closure of the cash office and was installed to take cash, card and cheque payments. The kiosk provision and maintenance contract is due to expire in December 2022, at which point further consideration would be needed to its continued effectiveness. The current annual maintenance cost for the kiosk is £1,511 per annum and upgrade costs in 2019 were £6,950.

1.4 In addition to the financial costs associated with the kiosk, resource time is necessary to empty and “cash-up” at the end of each day. This takes 2 officers half an hour each evening, in addition, staff within the team have reported that the kiosk often has operational difficulties and customers do not appear to find it easy to use, they are also required to regularly audit usage. Customer Services support is frequently needed to help customers complete payments through the kiosk which does not provide the most effective use of time for customers or staff.

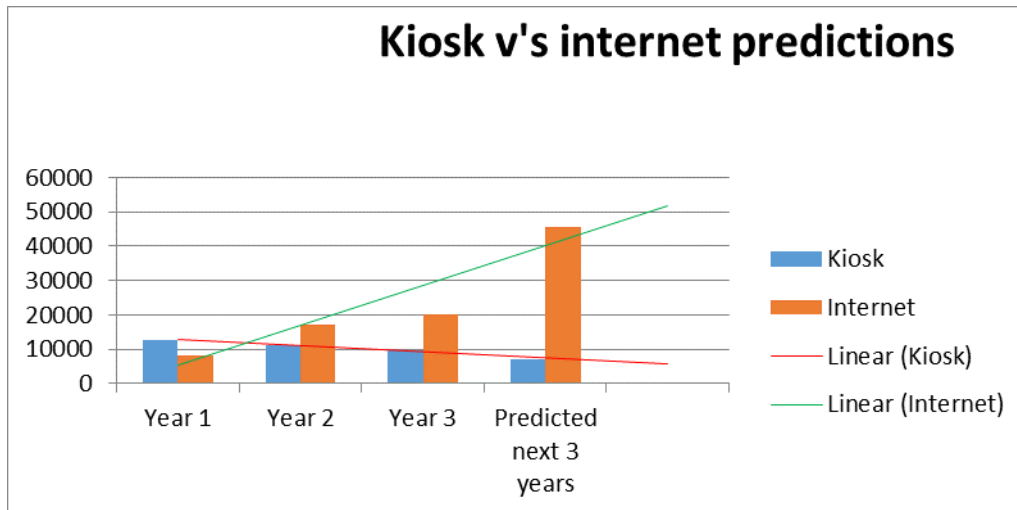
1.5 In terms of methods of payment, in 20/21, the kiosk has not been operational but customers were still able to make card payments online, or over the phone and make cash/cheque payments at reception or through the post. Payment trends during the pandemic have shown overall a decrease in payments to the Council across differing payment methods which is unsurprising given the disruption in service through the pandemic, however, there has been an increase in online payments in 20/21 compared to the previous financial year. This does demonstrate a small

channel shift in methods of payments which is positive and which customer services are keen to encourage moving forward.

The table below demonstrates how payments to the Council across different receiving methods have altered in the last two financial years.

Payment method	2019-20	2020-21	Difference
Kiosk	9353	0	-9353
Cash receipting	26146	23507	-2639
online payments	22888	25858	2970
automated payment line	8372	7463	-909
cheque	6002	3387	-2615
Standing orders	18857	15839	-3018
Total payments	109,231	86,369	-22862

Prior to Covid-19, in July 2019, an assessment of the kiosk utilisation was undertaken to predict future use, against online payments. The graph below shows the predictions made at that time with Year 1 reflecting kiosk usage in 2018/19:



Whilst this obviously did not predict the closure of the kiosk due to Covid-19, even without this factor, predicted increase in online payments meant a decline in the use of the kiosk. As this channel shift has essentially been brought forward due to Covid, it is considered an appropriate time to consider cessation of the kiosk service now, given that it has not been operational for some time and customers have become accustomed to its closure.

1.6 Options and alternative arrangements

Cheque Payments

If cheque payment was not available through the kiosk, cheques could simply be handed in at reception and dealt with in the same way as cheques received through the post. Customer Services staff will take the opportunity to encourage these customers to use alternative payment methods and advise on digital payment where possible.

1.7 Card Payments

If those customers paying by card made their payments online, either on their own device or one of the new touch screen self-service PC's within the new self –serve area to be created as part of the reception redesign in the Civic Centre, a reduction of over £1,000 per annum in card processing fees could be achieved from Finance budgets. This is due to the fact that card processing charges associated with the kiosk by World Pay (card processing company for the kiosk) are 0.60% per card transaction through the kiosk transaction. The card processing fee for online payments, via Capita, is 0.37% per transaction.

1.8 For those customers still presenting at the Civic Centre to make card payment, behavioural change learning exercises would be completed by either; showing the customer how to make an online payment on our self-service PC's, so that they can complete future transaction on their own device, or by encouraging them to pay by direct debit.

1.9 Cash Payments

For those customers bringing cash into the Civic Centre for payment, again, wherever possible customers will be educated about alternative ways to pay, however cash can still be accepted and processed in the same way as cash sent in by post. For Council Tax customers wishing to pay by cash, Post Office cards are already offered as an alternative option.

1.10 As a result of the channel shift from Covid-19, customers are already finding alternative ways to make payments to the Council. Whilst the contract for the kiosk was not due to expire until December 2022, it seems an ideal opportunity to cease the kiosk service now as customers have already got used to the kiosk being unavailable.

1.11 Carlton Hub

Creating a contact point for customers in the south of the borough was a Gedling Labour Manifesto pledge from the 2015 election. In 2016 the Police announced their intention to rent a small reception area at Carlton

Fire Station. Working with the Police, it was agreed that at no cost, the Council would occupy the area at Carlton Fire Station rented by the Police, one day a week (Wednesday) and provide a face to face service for customers. The Carlton Hub Customer Contact point opened in October 2017. Over the two year period to September 2019, 422 Gedling Borough Council customers visited the hub. This is on average 4.18 customers per week. The majority of customers attended the hub with documents to be scanned. Generally, the demand for the service at the hub was low, and the service did remove a resource from the Civic Centre for one day each week.

- 1.12 In March 2020, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Carlton Hub was closed and to date has not reopened. Throughout the pandemic, customer services have been undertaking vital humanitarian work, engaging with isolated and clinically vulnerable residents to ensure that they could still access services and did not become isolated in their homes. The working relationships between Customer Services and communities teams grew through the pandemic and as a result of information gleaned from customers through humanitarian work, and appointment bookings, it was identified that having a face to face contact point in Carlton is helpful, but it is not necessarily the only, or most effective way of engaging with residents in the community who most need assistance and support with Council services.
- 1.13 The Customer Services Manager has been in discussions with locality co-ordinators and community relations to gather information about where Customer Services could work most effectively with residents in the borough, and where a face to face service would be in demand. It is clear there are some gaps in certain pockets of the community in relation to digitalisation, and access to computers. Provision of customer services in such areas would be of great benefit to residents and would reduce the demand on Customer Services in respect of calls for payments. It would also reduce the need for customers to travel to the Civic Centre to make payments and may encourage residents to access paid services where previously they haven't due to lack of digital skills.
- 1.14 Since Customer Services started operating an appointment based service, footfall in the Civic Centre has reduced, which has meant customer services advisers can operate in a more agile way, working remotely and dealing with incoming calls and online queries at a faster rate. Also, the operation of the appointment system gives staff the opportunity to identify which areas of the borough customers are coming from for appointments, this also provides helpful evidence as to where a face to face liaison would be appropriate.
- 1.15 Customer Services are keen to balance the demands of customers with efficiency of service. By providing an outreach service around the

Borough, rather than in a fixed location, this enables customer services to be brought to those areas of the community who need that support. There is also an extended benefit to other service areas, as advice can be given by customer services about housing, debt recovery and other council services. This assists in the Council's objective of being a High Performing Council as set out in the Gedling Plan.

- 1.16 Venues for outreach sessions in the borough have already been investigated, and as a starter, Carlton Foodbank, St George's Centre, Newstead Centre, Netherfield foodbank and the Core Centre in Calverton have all expressed an interest in hosting. These areas are already identified by Customer Services as having a high footfall of customers into the Civic Centre, engaging and educating these customers in close proximity to their homes is likely to lead to a reduction in face to face services in the Civic Centre. These venues also provide an opportunity to work with partners such as the DWP who provide job clubs at these venues, as well as the CAB and other community groups. In addition to going out into the community, some of these community groups operating at these venues have started referring customers to the Council directly, this is due to officer's skill sets and services being highlighted during Covid-19 by the humanitarian team. Customer Services have developed a good relationship with community groups and therefore if demand at outreach sessions is not high, but vulnerable clients are identified, leaders of these community groups can simply refer customers to the Council to make contact.
- 1.17 Customer Services would theme outreach work to match demand, for example, Newstead is identified as an area where digital provision is low, so online payments etc are more difficult. Travel to the Civic Centre from Newstead however is also a challenge. By providing an outreach service and providing digital training on community PCs in the Newstead centre, this is likely to reduce demand on Customer Services staff in the longer term from customers making payment queries by telephone.
- 1.18 The final timetable of outreach sessions would be finalised if the proposals in this report are approved, but it is considered that a monthly outreach session to begin with, in different venues around the Borough would be appropriate, such sessions becoming more regular if demand is high, feedback is positive and there is a clear output demonstrating efficiency in customer services through a reduction in demand, in particular a reduction in demand in call levels as digital services increase and a reduction in face to face "drop ins" in the Civic Centre. Until recently Customer Services had a visiting officer post within the service who worked with vulnerable residents in the community. This post is currently vacant, and due to efficiencies required in the service, the work previously undertaken by this role needs to be managed in a different way. The outreach work would enable more vulnerable residents to be seen near to

their homes.

- 1.19 It is clear, particularly through Covid that it is those customers that most need our services who do not engage effectively. The work undertaken at the Carlton Hub was good, however demand was low. By taking customer services around the borough it is hoped that there will be a better take up of the service.

2 Proposal

- 2.1 It is proposed that to capitalise on the channel shift to online payments and to reduce the resource spent dealing with kiosk payments, that the payment kiosk service within the Civic Centre cease.
- 2.2 It is proposed that the Council continues to provide a contact point for customers around the borough but that this be delivered through a programme of outreach sessions at venues around the borough rather than from a fixed location at Carlton Fire Station. Advice from locality coordinators is that the summer is quiet in terms of community group meetings and sessions, and as such the Autumn, would be a better time to start the outreach work. If approved, work would be undertaken with the communication team to ensure effective promotion of the sessions.

3 Alternative Options

- 3.1 The kiosk could be re-opened to customers and utilised until contract expiry in December 2022, however, this would not take advantage of the change in payment method that has been in place throughout Covid, it would also be more difficult to remove the service once customers new it was available once more.
- 3.2 The Carlton Hub could restart, however it is not considered that this is the most effective way of delivering a face to face service in the community. A more “mobile” outreach programme which targets areas of the community who need to engage with the Council but don’t, using all the lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic is considered to be more effective.

4 Financial Implications

- 4.1 There is a saving on card payments if they are processed through the Council’s cash receipting system rather than the kiosk. In addition, once the contract for the kiosk expires, this will be an ongoing saving to the Council of £1,511 per annum in maintenance charges. To continue the service past 2022, would be likely to incur additional cost in the region of £7,000 for upgrade. Closure of the kiosk will also lead to a reduction in cash collection fees as fewer collections would be required from the Civic Centre each week. This saving is estimated to be in the region of £1000

per annum.

- 4.2 The Carlton Hub cost (prior to Covid-19) on average £600 per annum to staff, so cost was minimal, however that resource was not meeting any real demand. The mobile outreach work would create a reduction in demand on Customer Services in the long run, as residents are advised of services and how to self-serve. This will contribute to longer term efficiencies in Customer Services. There may be some cost associated with the use of certain venues, although many are pleased that the Council would wish to attend and as such do not wish to charge.

5 Legal Implications

- 5.1 The contract for the kiosk, cannot be terminated early, as such, the Council must remain in contract until December 2022. The arrangement in relation to the Carlton Hub require 1 months' notice of termination. Officers will need to ensure that appropriate data security measures are in place when working remotely from locations around the borough.

6 Equalities Implications

- 6.1 It is considered that the outreach work will have a positive impact for those with certain protected characteristics. The service aims to engage with those more vulnerable members of society who may not be able to travel to the Civic Centre or who may not have the digital facility to contact the Council through digital channels. It is a real opportunity to work with residents from all backgrounds to ensure positive engagement with Council Services. For those with disabilities who may find travel to the Civic Centre more challenging, the outreach service will provide easier access to advice. The kiosk removal is likely to have limited impact as alternative methods of payment would still be available at the Civic Centre.

7 Carbon Reduction/Environmental Sustainability Implications

- 7.1 None directly arising from this report.

8 Appendices

- 8.1 None

9 Background Papers

- 9.1 None

10 Reasons for Recommendations

- 10.1 To take the opportunity to cease the kiosk service following on from its closure during Covid-19 and the resulting channel shift.
- 10.2 To ensure that face to face service provision, away from the Civic Centre is as effective as possible and is provided for as many residents as possible.