

## London Borough of Enfield

### Individual Portfolio Holder Decision

Rule 15 decision key decision number KD5164/U210 (published 22/5/2020)

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**Subject:** Reopening Customer Service face to face provision in the light of Covid-19

**Wards:** All

**Cabinet Member:** Cllr Maguire

**Key Decision:** Yes

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### Purpose of Report

1. With the recovery guidance published by the government on the 11<sup>th</sup> May, it is appropriate to review the next steps for delivery of Customer Service face to face provision for the public, as we transition out of lock down. Customer Services face to face services deliver the core information, advice and guidance first point of contact for residents. This report sets out the high-level principles for this transition to re-open Customer Service face to face provision, so that we can provide critical services to those most in need in Enfield, while providing a safe environment for both staff and customers.

### Proposals

2. The proposed 5 principles of the transition plan for resuming some Customer Service face to face provision in the light of Covid-19 are:
  - Reopen critical face to face services in a carefully phased way, in some of the flagship Libraries, when it is safe to do so for customers and staff, with the appropriate changes to work style, physical space etc. This will be responsive to the dynamic situation (see phasing plan below and Appendix 1);
  - Enhance services to provide joined up help for those who are experiencing complex problems or who are vulnerable (e.g. experiencing financial hardship) and developing integrated and preventative services that support the delivery of the Poverty Commission recommendations, specifically number 4 (early intervention to stop housing problems), 24 (benefits advice and debt support), 25 (maximising benefits take up);

- Continue to deliver transactional services via the web and telephony services to resolve most enquiries at the first point of contact, and ensure improvements continue to be made in order to make these transactions increasingly accessible (Appendix 2);
  - Align to future operational plans for council buildings including the use of the Civic Centre ground floor as a democratic and meetings hub for customers, to open in September, following refurbishment of reception.
  - Use the learning from this transition to inform the refreshed Customer Strategy later this year.
3. It is proposed to use a 4-step phased approach to reopen critical face to face services, moving provision from the Civic Centre and John Wilkes House to two main flagship Libraries, Enfield Town and Edmonton Green Libraries (see Appendix 1). Initially services will be limited, starting with support for complex needs and vulnerable customers. In the longer term, it is proposed that the existing Edmonton Green Library access centre is enhanced to provide additional integrated services, which will also serve as a test and learn model before developing such integrated service hubs in other flagship libraries depending on demand and need.
  4. That the date of phased reopening to customers is in line with Government advice on timing and safety measures and has the support of the Trade Unions. If the timetable needs to change as a result of government guidance or operational experience, the trade unions will be consulted, and the Director in consultation with the Portfolio Holder will make amendments to the timetable described in this report accordingly.
  5. To approve the allocation of £233k from the approved 2020/21 Libraries Capital budget approved as part of the 10-year Capital programme, for the creation of space for face to face customer services, initially using a small proportion of the budget to expand self-serve opportunities (phase 1 and 2), and gradually investing in the development of the broader integrated service model (phase 3 & 4).

### **Reason for the proposals**

6. There is a need to plan to resume the delivery of critical Customer Service face to face provision safely and as local to people's homes as possible to reduce reliance on public transport at the same time as; continuing to deliver transactional services on the web and phones for all those that can access them in this way in order to focus face to face resources on those in greatest need, and; using the opportunity to accelerate the plan to develop some flagship libraries as the location to deliver more effective and integrated face to face advice services.

### **Relevance to Council Plan**

7. The transfer Customer Service face to face provision to flagship libraries, starting with Edmonton Green and Enfield Town, and the longer term

development into integrated service hubs bringing information, advice and guidance services together, will support all the priorities of the Council Plan (well-connected neighbourhoods, strong and healthy communities and build the local economy and create a thriving place) and will in particular support the early help agenda.

## **Background**

8. In line with lockdown measures, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Council buildings were closed to the public in March. Prior to this the Civic Centre was the focus of most of the Customer Services face to face contact, with a small offer at John Wilkes House, Edmonton. Appendix 2 sets out the full range of the services that were delivered at the Civic Centre, where the majority of footfall (75%) was for financial assessments and homelessness/housing advice. Several actions were taken to ensure that service accessibility was maintained during the pandemic including:
  - temporary relaxation of the rules for provision of evidence for claiming benefits (government directive);
  - acceleration of the closure of cashiers in March (not end May as planned) and the successful use of PayPoint, which by early May had already taken 7000 transactions with no reported issues and delivering excellent access to paying in and out facilities for customers in 140 locations across the borough;
  - delivery of new Financial Hardship pages on the website, already the second most popular web page, and that allows access to a new call back and casework service to help those most in financial need;
  - new proactive outward-bound calls to businesses to maximise uptake of the business rates grants, where the council's performance has been good;
  - increased capacity of council tax, business rates, council tax support and Housing Benefit calls, so that the complex enquiries from households concerned about benefits and business rates, could be managed, and still at an industry high level of 91% calls answered.
9. Performance during this time has continued to be good – and in some cases improved. The Council's telephony response rate was very high at over 97% across all services (except for council tax, business rates and benefits as above at 91%) and the web chat answer level at over 94%, significantly higher performance than the February figures of 91.5% and 85% respectively. Performance improvement is partly due to reduced demand and increased web access to services, but should also be set against the fact that the contact centre has been operating at an estimated 50% of full time staff as a result of staff being taken off business as usual contact to work on the community support line (the shielded hub response to Covid-19).

## **Main Considerations for the Council**

10. Maintaining and building on this increased digital access to transactional services, will allow the council to now focus its important but limited face to face resource on those who most need support, in keeping with the Council Plan

and Poverty Commission recommendations, and supported by the digital improvements described above and to be further developed in the refreshed Customer Strategy by the end of 20/21.

11. The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy ("Our plan to rebuild" updated on the 12<sup>th</sup> May), sets out a stepped approach to recovery. Step 3, with the indicative timescale of "no earlier than 4<sup>th</sup> July" suggests this will be the time for public places to start to reopen, subject to Covid-19 safety measures being in place.

12. Thought has been given to delivering critical customer service face to face provision closer to the residents that need them, to increase accessibility and reduce travel time. Since 75% of footfall for face to face services is focussed on financial hardship and housing/homelessness, aligning face to face services to the boroughs areas of need (deprivation) is sensible. Appendices 3a) and 3b) illustrate the location of existing libraries and the map of deprivation in the borough shows where financial hardship exists. Given this picture, it is proposed that the face to face support is initially based at:

- Edmonton Green Library, close to the pre covid-19 service at John Wilkes House and an area of financial hardship and housing need.
- Enfield Town Library (close to the pre Covid-19 service at the Civic Centre and at a central geographic location in the borough).

13. The principles around phasing

- Phase 1 is mediated self-service at Edmonton Green Library and Enfield Town Library, reinforced with officer triaging support once we are confident of having enough resources for a consistent service and ensure staff and customers can be safe.
- Phase 1 takes a test and learn approach, so that the safety elements of expansion into flagship libraries in the long term based on demand trends and availability of staffing resources is secured.
- Develop safe, social distancing face to face offer in the 2 flagship libraries, starting with only critical customer services (e.g. welfare, debt, benefits and homelessness advice) and phasing in broader services (including library services) over time.
- Each phase will be reviewed before moving onto the next phase (taking government guidance on Covid-19 recovery into account) and staff and union consultation will be delivered between phases, including reviewing the risk assessment.
- The learning from this transition approach will feed into the refreshed Customer Strategy to be delivered by the end of the financial year.

14. In response to Covid-19, face to face services in the Civic Centre and John Wilkes House in Edmonton as well as all libraries were closed to the public at

the end of March. The council's response was to ensure services were accessible and residents have still had access to council services via phones, web and web chat. During lockdown, a significant move of customer interaction from face to face to phones and digital channels, has been achieved. Some services have adapted and expanded, such as for residents experiencing financial hardship, businesses applying for the grant and those needing to pay cash in or draw it out.

15. Prior to lockdown a wider review of the council's approach to customer access was already underway. This has two elements: the improvement of digital service delivery and, support for people who are vulnerable or with complex needs who would benefit from an integrated and coordinated approach from the council and its partners. The digital improvements include a new system to manage customer information (customer relationship management system) and to improve the web site so that most simple transactions are carried out online. These large-scale improvements will be fully implemented by mid-2021. There is an expectation that the council will deliver a level of Customer Service face to face provision for the most vulnerable residents. The council's response to providing services during Covid19 has provided an opportunity to accelerate this vision in advance of the both the new Customer Strategy being developed through consultation later this financial year.
16. Delivering critical face to face services in Libraries as part of an integrated service approach, enables residents to access a wide range of support in one place, encourages that support to be joined up with other provision from the statutory and voluntary sectors, and has the potential to deliver better resident and community outcomes. As an activity it is in keeping with the wider role of libraries as the centre of information and connections in local communities. This model is being rolled out successfully in many other localities e.g. Newcastle, South Woodford and Barking and Dagenham.
17. Joined up services elsewhere have proven to improve a wide range of outcomes for residents, including housing and income outcomes. This is particularly important currently, with the impact of the pandemic in Enfield having increased the number of people claiming Universal Credit by 5,240 in the month from March to April 2020. The number of 25-49-year-olds claiming unemployment benefits jumped by 77% (3,440 people) in the same period.

### **Safeguarding Implications**

18. This plan will provide local support to some of our most vulnerable residents, while maintaining the digital offer for those who are not able to leave their homes. The plans support the Safeguarding Adults Strategy 2018 to 2023 which includes 'work to reduce isolation'. On implementing this plan and considering the increased scope of the Libraries, consideration should be given the training needs of the staff for Safeguarding Adults, Modern Slavery and Domestic Abuse. Also, consideration should be given to the needs of young people known to the Leaving Care Service, who may need additional support around housing and benefits. Support is accessible from Triangle House, but additional access points may be useful

## **Public Health Implications**

19. Transferring services and enhancing the digital offer should increase access to services for our most vulnerable residents. Additional face-to-face services will be of particular benefit to those who may be excluded through lack of access to IT etc. Opening of services should be in line with Government guidance on measures to reduce the transmission of the coronavirus.

## **Equalities Impact of the Proposal**

20. Libraries are a more friendly, welcoming and comfortable environment than official council buildings and therefore should be more supportive for groups with protected characteristics. Enfield Town and Edmonton Green libraries are accessible buildings with lifts for those who cannot use the stairs, however the customer service access facility will be on the ground floors.
21. A predictive equality impact assessment (EQIA) has been undertaken on the proposed change in service model and locations (full report in Appendix 4). This is based on a reflection of the Equality Act, nine protected characteristics and their service use of Library and Civic based customer services. It was found that the proposals should have an overall positive to neutral impact on all residents in the borough.
22. Where negative implications were found, solutions for mitigation has been agreed and will be put in place. In addition, it is recommended that a review of the EQIA to be conducted when the service is up and running, to ensure that we continue to mitigate / limit any unforeseen negative equality impact of the proposed changes.
23. Libraries adhere to a universal offer that provides quality information, support and guidance through many channels and partnerships which create strong, cohesive communities, in which individuals can flourish economically and socially.

## **Environment and Climate Change Considerations**

24. This proposal has beneficial environmental implications since it: minimises the travel distance for some customers by creating two service centres rather than one, and; supports the continuation of digital service provision for those that can access their services in this way.

## **Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken**

25. If services at the Civic Centre are re-established only to subsequently move them to the Libraries (the medium term vision) this could be more confusing to the customers at a time when service delivery around financial hardship and housing/homelessness will be critical; It would also potentially undo the channel shift now delivered. In addition, the refurbishment plans for the Civic Centre could prove disruptive to service provision in the short to medium term,

and the Civic Centre is more constrained due to the need to enable social distancing compared to the use of two flagship Libraries.

### Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks

### Financial Implications

26. This report is seeking approval to allocate £233,117 for the enhancement of

Risk	Mitigation
Confusion about where customers need to go for what services given libraries will reopen in July and the civic centre refurbishment not until September	Communications plan with a proactive communications campaign will clarify that civic centre is a democratic and meetings hub, and the flagship library hubs for information, advice and guidance.
Government Covid-19 response and advice changes	Keep monitoring advice and move proposed phased reopening in line with advice on reopening of public places
Keeping customers and staff safe	A thorough risk assessment with fully implemented proposals, that has been through staff and union consultation, and with public health and health and safety sign off.
Staff resources are constrained due to Covid-19	Phased reopening starts with 2 libraries and only moves to the 3 <sup>rd</sup> and 4 <sup>th</sup> if resources allow.

Edmonton Green and Enfield Town Library from the 2020/21 approved Libraries capital budget. This will fund enhancements to the service, including more computer equipment for customers to use and safe and confidential spaces for meetings to take place. The costs are detailed in the table below.

Cost Area	Enfield Town	Edmonton Green	Total Capital	Total Revenue
Building works	122,617	80,000	202,617	
IT equipment	17,000	13,500	30,500	
Equipment relocation	2,000	5,000		7,000
<b>Project management</b>				<b>70,000</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>141,617</b>	<b>98,500</b>	<b>233,117</b>	<b>77,000</b>

27. The Project management cost of £70k, refers to the cost of the Transformation Project and Programme management resource required to deliver the project. This will be funded from capital receipts, in accordance

with the using the flexible use of capital receipts guidance. The balance of £7k will be funded from existing service revenue budgets.

## **Legal Implications**

28. Section 1 of the Localism Act 2011 (the general power of competence) permits the Council to do anything that individuals generally may do provided it is not prohibited by legislation, and subject to Public Law principles. S.111 Local Government Act 1972 gives a local authority power to do anything which is calculated to facilitate or is conducive or incidental to the discharge of any of its functions. The proposals set out in this Report are consistent with these powers. When introducing changes, such as those outlined in this report, the Council should have due regard to the public sector equality duty and to duties to those with protected characteristics, as set out in the Equality Act 2010.
29. The government has announced that it will establish five ministerial-led taskforces to facilitate the reopening of businesses and public places that are currently closed. Announcement of the taskforces follows publication on 11 May 2020 of the government's COVID-19 recovery strategy and guidance on working safely during the COVID-19 pandemic, referred to above. Responsibility for the taskforces has been allocated to different government departments with Libraries coming under the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The implementation following this report must take account of any further guidance that is published further to consideration by this taskforce, or by the Government generally.
30. In implementing the detailed proposals for phased reopening of face-to-face services in the libraries, the Council needs to take into consideration general health and safety duties towards its staff and to the general public.

## **Workforce Implications**

31. The trade unions have been consulted on the planned re-opening and re-location of customer face to face services. Service risk assessments have also been shared with the trade unions. Staff will need to be kept informed in relation to these proposed changes that will result in a permanent change in their location of work. Service and location risk assessments should be published, and staff should be consulted and informed of measures that will be taken to minimise any risk of infection from Covid-19.

Individual risk assessments should be completed for all staff who will be working face to face within a library and appropriate actions taken to protect staff where their individual risk assessment identifies them as being in a high-risk category. Contracts of employment state the employees place of work but includes a clause to allow the Council to locate staff at any other place of employment within the Borough.

## **Property Implications**

32. The proposals detailed within this report are aligned with the proposals contained within the March Cabinet Report which approved the Build the Change Programme.

## **Other Implications**

33. There are no specific performance and data implications of this report. Ongoing monitoring will take place around Library activity including visits, book issues and renewals and web activity that can help inform future service planning and development. Appendix 4 shows where the areas of greatest deprivation are in the Borough, and this map will be reviewed and enhanced in order to fully understand customer need.
34. A customer survey was commissioned in February 2020 at the Civic Centre reception and Edmonton Access Centre to understand the reasons why customers were using the face to face channel rather than other communication channels. The survey found that a high percentage of customers (46%) visited to hand in documents for their benefit applications. In some cases, this function can be done electronically but our vulnerable customers, at times needs assistance with scanning documents.
35. Service data is collated each month on the number of customers requiring our counter service at the Civic Centre, which provides a profile of users by protected characteristics. A manual count of customers took place between April and August 2018. An average of 5524 customers visited each month. The top 4 reasons that customers visit the civic are: (in order of highest demand service needs): Business Desk; Financial Assessment / Benefits/ ESS/ DHP; Council Tax; Concessionary Travel.

## **Options Considered**

36. Reopening the Civic Centre for Customer Services information, advice and guidance is the other option considered. However, there is already a vision to move Customer Service face to face provision from the Civic Centre to flagship Libraries and a new vision for the use of the Civic Centre as a democratic and meetings hub. For the reasons described in the risk section above, this option was rejected.

## **Conclusions.**

37. To agree a 4-step phased approach to reopen critical face to face services, moving provision from the Civic Centre and John Wilkes House to Enfield Town and Edmonton Green Libraries (see Appendix 1).
38. Initially services will be limited, starting with complex needs and vulnerable customers and that the default channel for most services will be telephone or web, and these channels will continue to be developed and strengthened.

39. In the longer term, the existing Edmonton Green Library access centre will be enhanced to provide additional integrated services, which will also serve as a test and learn model before developing such integrated service hubs in other flagship libraries depending on demand and need.
40. To allocate £233,117 for the enhancement of Edmonton Green and Enfield Town Library from the 2020/21 approved Libraries capital budget for this purpose.

### **Background Papers**

*Appendix 1: Proposed Phasing Approach*

*Appendix 2: Face to face services delivered from the civic centre*

*Appendix 3a) Deprivation Map, 3b) Map of Libraries*

*Appendix 4 -EQIA*