

Equality Impact Assessment – Change to opening times of Contact Centre Telephone Lines (01483 755855)

Officer responsible for completing EIA: Revenue, Benefits and Customer Services Manager	Manager responsible for EIA: David Ripley
Strategic Director responsible for EIA: Kevin Foster	Date last updated: 7th December 2023

1. Introduction

This Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) seeks to identify impacts and effect of this proposal with the aim of assessing whether it would have a disparate impact on persons with a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. As part of this assessment, consideration will be given to ways in which any such impact can be avoided or mitigated, any negative impacts arising from this proposal will be assessed and where this could be reduced in their impact this will be noted in the attached action plan. The Council also recognises that it may not completely remove all negative impacts.

The purpose is to provide impartial information to assist in the decision-making process and inform rather than determine policy. The objective is not to make the decision but to assist decision makers through the provision of relevant information.

The Council faces a critical financial shortfall owing to its historic investment strategy which has resulted in unaffordable borrowing, inadequate steps to repay that borrowing and high values of irrecoverable loans.

To address these severe financial challenges the Council must make significant saving alongside taking steps to 'live within its means' in the future.

Widespread reductions and changes to public-facing services, alongside reducing management and internal costs, have been set out in the [Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy](#).

The EIA will assess the impact of the proposal to reduce the Contact Centre telephone line opening hours from 5pm to 1pm. This is to allow more time in the afternoons to work through casework, resolve customer queries, and undertake training to improve the future service. The impact of this change will be monitored and reviewed for impact. Direct phone lines to the majority of services, including housing, parking and planning will remain unchanged, This is a temporary measure.

2. Impact on services

As part of its modernisation programme to become a more sustainable organisation going forward, the Council is looking to re-design the customer service team and promote the [Council's digital first strategy](#). The aim is to deliver better services online, 24/7 365 days a year, improving access for all residents, regardless of their circumstances. This has already been implemented by many Councils and Woking is behind the trend. Website publishing, intelligent form integration, and modern telephony systems are being investigated. This will be followed by a tendering process with the hope to have the new supplier appointed by spring 2024. This does not mean improvements to the existing software cannot be implemented sooner depending upon cost against benefit.

As part of this process, it is proposed that the Contact Centre phones are only available until 1pm. The front-line employees taking the calls will be upskilled to deal with the most common queries directly, currently Council Tax queries, so they will not need to be passed onto departments. The majority of calls coming into the Contact Centre relate to Council Tax, the benefit of having highly trained customer service staff in Council Tax means they can deal with the majority of queries at the first point of contact, thus improving customer satisfaction, reducing calls being passed into back-office teams and speeding up the processing times of the bulk of Council Tax work. This does not require new

software systems however once these are introduced (estimated late 2024 / early 2025) then these will allow those that can self serve to do so and free front-line staff to concentrate on the vulnerable and elderly. This will give these groups more staff availability as currently they are lost amongst the calls which do not promote self service to those that can.

Once initial Council Tax training has been provided this can be reported back and the impacts on customers reported. As well as providing callers with answers at the first point of contact it will reduce the number of calls passed through to the Council tax team, which in turn means they can concentrate on processing work rather than covering phones. Again, providing service improvement.

All other telephone numbers (Housing, Community Centres, Waste, Planning and Parking) will be unaffected.

3. Engagement and Consultation

This is part of the Councils' Digital Transformation Strategy and Fit for The Future programme to make the organisation more sustainable moving forward. Once implemented there will be a superior customer experience.

Customer Services teams have been kept up to date with proposals. It was officially confirmed at the launch of Phase 2 of the organisational changes, and all will have opportunity to feedback in their 1:1 and via the feedback form.

		Positive impact?			Negative impact?	No specific impact	What will the impact be? If the impact is negative, how can it be mitigated? (action) This section needs to be completed as evidence of what the positive impact is or what actions are being taken to mitigate any negative impacts
		Eliminate discrimination	Advance equality	Good relations			
Gender	Men					x	The reduction in opening times for the Contact Centre telephone number (01483 755855) is only a short-term measure whilst a modern telephony system is being implemented, which will offer a superior 24/7 service. There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations: Phone lines will still be available from 9am – 1pm. The Civic reception is open between 9am – 4.45pm for face-to-face appointments. Self service terminals and assistance is available at the Civic reception. Automated telephony payments emails and letters are also available. There is also the option to open the afternoon service during particularly busy periods, eg. Council Tax billing or elections for communication.
	Women					x	There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above.
Gender Reassignment						x	There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above.
Race	White					x	There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above.
	Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups					x	There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above.

	Asian/Asian British					x	There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above.
	Black/African/Caribbean/Black British					x	There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above.
	Gypsies / travellers					x	There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above.
	Another ethnic group					x	There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above.
Disability	Physical					x	Existing arrangements will continue un-affected such as Face to Face “essential” appointment to those vulnerable customers. Employees will be up skilled to deal more accurately and efficiently with queries, eg. not having to pass onto departments. More staff time will be available for vulnerable customers as those that can self-service/go digital will be signposted to doing so.
	Sensory					x	As Above
	Learning Difficulties					x	As Above
	Mental Health					x	As Above
Sexual Orientation	Lesbian, gay men, bisexual					x	There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above.
Age	Older people (50+)					x	Phone lines will still be available from 9am – 1pm. The Civic reception is open between 9am – 4.45pm for face-to-face appointments. Self service terminals and assistance is available at the Civic reception. Upskilling of employees will mean more time will be available to support vulnerable customers going forward. Queries from older residents tend to be about housing and waste. These will not be affected. This group will include people who are not able to access services digitally, the impact will need to be monitored going forward.
	Younger people (16 - 25)						There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above.

Religion or Belief	Faith Groups					There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above
Pregnancy & maternity						There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above
Marriage & Civil Partnership						There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above
Socio-economic Background				x		Homeless: Existing process will still be in place for emergencies. Emergency homelessness support: If you are made homeless out of hours (evenings, weekends and bank holidays), please call 0203 701 3590.
Carers					x	There is no specific impact on this group. Mitigations will be as above
Other identified groups	Those without access to the internet.					Phone lines will still be available from 9am – 1pm. The Civic reception is open between 9am – 4.45pm for face-to-face appointments. Self service terminals and assistance is available at the Civic reception. Upskilling of employees will mean more time will be available to support vulnerable customers going forward. This group will include people who are not able to access services digitally, the impact will need to be monitored going forward.

ACTION PLAN:

Actions identified from EIA.	Target completion date	Responsible Officer	Comments
Work already underway to update Website pages for customer self-service, documents to sign post where to find information, email replies sign posting information on-line.	This will be a continuing process as webpages need changing and kept up to date. A Web backlog group was created in July 2023 and a number of quick wins improvements have already been actioned. The main completion will be linked to implementation of new Digital Transformation software such as Telephony, integrated on-line forms, chat bots etc...	Adam Walther	Lead Digital member is Andy Gresham who makes the changes. Members of the group also include Kate Mair, Alex Pullen, Adam Przedzimirski. Plus, staff from Revs, Bens & Customer Services feeding in customers issues and suggestions
Train employees to deal with more complex queries, particularly relating to Council Tax, which is the most common area call relate to.	This is linked to the Council's Phase 2 Consultation completion date. All Customer Service staff are "At Risk" we can envisage the training will take c.3 months for most staff, once we know which staff will be retained at the end of Phase 2. Therefore training should be completed by August 2024.	David Ripley	
Contain with "quick wins" webpage meetings with Andy Gresham and Marketing Comms to improve easy of access to information and self service.	This will be a continuing process as webpages need changing and kept up to date. A Web backlog group was created in July 2023 and a number of quick wins improvements have already been actioned. The main completion will be linked to implementation of new Digital Transformation software such as Telephony, integrated on-line forms, chat bots etc	Adam Walther	Lead Digital member is Andy Gresham who makes the changes. Members of the group also include Kate Mair, Alex Pullen, Adam Przedzimirski. Plus, staff from Revs, Bens & Customer Services feeding in customers issues and suggestions
Monitor impact of transfer to digital, eg. those who will be digitally excluded/ focus groups.		David Ripley	Monitoring of web page/form hits can be carried by Andy Gresham Digital, this would show increase of use on-line forms, visits to new webpage providing residents with self service options.

			<p>New improved telephony system would allow for both customer and staff monitoring and performance. Identifying areas of weakness where customers not getting the service they need or unable to self serve.</p> <p>Monitoring with update software could be as frequently as required.</p>
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SIGNOFF:

LEGAL SERVICES: Completed	DATE: 8 January 2024
STRATEGIC DIRECTOR: Completed	DATE: 23 January 2024
REVIEW PANEL MEMBER: Completed	DATE: 4 January 2024