
**EXTENDED CUSTOMER CENTRE AND TOWN HALL GROUND FLOOR
REFURBISHMENT WORKS**

**Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor Stephen Harker
Efficiency and Resources Portfolio**

Responsible Director - Paul Wildsmith, Director of Resources

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to set out the drivers for undertaking a project to extend the existing Customer Centre along with the associated refurbishment of the ground floor of the Town Hall, and to seek approval for the release of funding for the project.

Summary

2. The Council opened its Customer Centre based at the Town Hall in 2005 and since then has delivered a range of services from this contact point including but not Housing Benefits, Housing, Parking, Local Taxation, Concessionary Fares amongst others.
3. At the time of opening the Centre was equipped with a number of contact point desks and five private interview booths, with integrated queue management technology to assist in routing customers to where they needed to be. The Centre was an adequate size for the average volume of customers being dealt with at the time of opening, however it was noted that on very busy days the Centre could not cope well with customer numbers. This trend has continued since 2005, and has become more acute over the last 12-18 months.
4. A proposal to extend the Customer Centre has been drawn up, with supporting refurbishment works to the ground floor of the Town Hall which is linked to savings arising from and supports the Council's asset rationalisation project. These proposals are supported by a number of drivers which are listed below, and described further in the main report:
 - (a) The significant increase in customer volumes, particularly as a result of the Welfare Reforms and the inadequacy of appropriate accommodation to deal with enquiries of this nature
 - (b) Driving down the cost of contact with improved contact channel management particularly around self-serve and automation

- (c) The opportunity to rationalise disparate customer contact points and reduce revenue costs
 - (d) Increased capacity for partnership working
5. Budget provision of £750,000 has been made within the MTFP. In addition, there may be an opportunity to contribute towards the project costs by realigning £46,000 of capital funding within the Adults budget originally allocated to the refurbishment of Central House Reception to this project, on the assumption that Central House Reception closes to casual callers upon completion of the extended Customer Centre.
 6. The designs are progressing to RIBA Stage D and detailed drawings and costs, although final actual costs may not be known until after the Tender stage. Once the final costs are known further approval may be sought if the costs exceed £750,000
 7. It is anticipated that additional services will be delivered through the extended Customer Centre and this will enable the closure of some remaining reception/transaction points. A savings profile will be developed following agreement of a plan to phase in additional services.

Recommendation

8. It is recommended that :-
 - (a) The £750,000 funding required to deliver the proposal be approved and released from the 2013/2014 capital MTFP.
 - (b) The £46,000 capital funding within the Adults budget be realigned to this project.
 - (c) The Director of Resources, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Efficiency and Resources Portfolio, be authorised to progress the project, but to vary the scope of the works and the resulting costs where deemed appropriate to achieve the desired outcomes.

Reasons

9. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons :-
 - (a) To progress the Council's Customer Strategy in particular around achieving a Single Point of Contact
 - (b) To improve the customer experience
 - (c) To equip the Council with contemporary fit for purpose facilities with capacity to deal with increased customer numbers
 - (d) To support the Council's Asset Rationalisation project

- (e) To achieve efficiency savings through the co-location of disparate customer facing staff.
- (f) To improve the customer experience by providing facilities that are fit for purpose.

Paul Wildsmith
Director of Resources

Background Papers

No Background papers were used in the preparation of this report

Catherine Whitehead: Extension 2306

S17 Crime and Disorder	This report has no implications for crime and disorder.
Health and Well Being	Improving the standard of accommodation will be beneficial to health and wellbeing.
Sustainability	Moving to fewer better managed buildings will lead to a reduction in the Council's carbon emissions.
Diversity	There are no diversity issues.
Wards Affected	Central
Groups Affected	Not applicable
Budget and Policy Framework	The report does represent a change to the budget.
Key Decision	This is a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision.
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	The Customer Centre delivers services which contribute to a number of stands of the Community Strategy.
Efficiency	Efficiencies will be achieved by reducing the number of rental properties we currently occupy and improving the use and flexibility of the Council's own accommodation.

MAIN REPORT

Background

10. In 2005 the former Rates Hall was refurbished to provide a Customer Centre for a range of Council Services, thereby enabling the closure of a number of disparate reception points and routing many customers to a single point of contact for face to face enquiries. Since that time the Centre has reconfigured some of the original fixtures and fittings in order to make best use of the space however a number of issues have been highlighted, outlined below, which have raised concerns about the sufficiency of the existing Centre, and whether it remains 'fit for purpose'.

Drivers for Change

11. Customer volumes (footfall) has increased significantly since the Centre opened in 2005, and has risen even further as a result of the recent Welfare Reforms with customers often presenting in crisis and needing to discuss their issues with staff in private interview facilities. The existing Centre is limited to five private interview booths and demand upon these is rapidly increasing. The remaining customer space in the existing Centre is unsuitable for confidential discussions and is therefore better used for transactional services which are expected to decrease as the Authority develops additional online services. Meeting booths in the main reception area of the Town Hall have been temporarily decommissioned and reconfigured as customer interview booths in order to take some of the pressure away from the existing Centre however this is not a sustainable solution going forward. These facilities are not suitable for use in the longer term due to the lack of confidentiality (the booths are not soundproof), the lack of suitable exit for staff, and the distance from the Customer Centre. In addition, a temporary waiting area has been provided adjacent to the main staircase which in itself is inadequate if large numbers of customers are waiting due to the lack of space for pushchairs and wheelchairs. In the medium to long term this space is also expected to be incorporated into the detailed designs for the DfE collaboration space and therefore an alternative solution must be found.
12. Driving down the cost of contact is an underpinning element of the Customer Strategy, and the proposals to extend and refurbish the Customer Centre are key to this. The existing Centre does not have the capacity to deliver additional services and this limits the extent to which the cost of customer contact can be reduced. By building in the physical capacity to deliver additional services a single point of contact for face to face enquiries can be established for services and enquiries that need a higher degree of staff intervention and are more complex and time consuming to resolve. These are also services that tend to be of higher value to the customer and tend to be those that they will devote their time to resolving. This will be supported by self-serve facilities where customers will be encouraged and guided through requesting and/or resolving issues using technology and online facilities.
13. Following on from this, by delivering additional service through the Customer Centre a rationalisation of contact points can be undertaken, thereby reducing the

number of face to face access points and reducing revenue costs. Face to face contact is traditionally the most expensive to service as it carries large overheads, fixed costs, and is often the most resource intensive in terms of transaction time, and this holds true for every customer access point. Revenue costs escalate when there are numerous access points, and consistency of service is difficult to achieve. Focussing wherever possible on a single point of contact can reduce confusion and misdirection for customers, and maximise staff resources by further encouraging multi-skilling across the customer team.

14. The capacity of the existing Centre also critically limits the ability of the Authority to work with partners particularly on customer contact where customers may need to access more than one agency or partner to resolve particular issues. Increasingly customers are expecting a single point of contact approach to dealing with issues, particularly life events that can cut across organisational boundaries, and there is no capacity currently to facilitate joint and shared working within our existing Centre. Extending the Centre will enable the Authority to progress some of the partnership arrangements, and accommodate them.

Proposals for an Extended Customer Centre

15. Scheme drawings have been prepared (**Appendix 1**) comprising the refurbishment of the existing Centre, extending into existing office accommodation to provide additional interview booths. To accommodate the extended Customer Centre, additional refurbishment works on the ground floor of the Town Hall to provide modern, open plan office space have been proposed and these are shown annotated on **Appendix 2**. This additional and refurbished office space supports our asset rationalisation objectives, and is linked to savings arising from the relocation of the Depot from Vicarage Road and vacating The Beehive.
16. In summary, the proposals set out in Appendix 2 would:
 - (a) Provide reconfigured interview booths at **location F**, which help to deal with additional demand following the implementation of the welfare reforms and which are now in use.
 - (b) Provide open plan refurbished office space capable of accommodating around 25 workstations at **location A**.
 - (c) Provide an extended Customer Centre in **locations B and E**, with at least 13 interview booths in addition to open plan/triage space for quick enquiries, a large waiting area, self serve facilities, child's play area, and toilet facilities.
 - (d) Open plan office accommodation behind the new interview booths maximising space planning opportunities (**location C**)
 - (e) Increased occupancy of G01 (**location D**) bringing it more in line with the majority of office accommodation in the Town Hall.