

Report to: **Hub Committee**
Date: **19th March 2019**
Title: **Northern Outreach Service**
Portfolio Area: **Customer First, Cllr Annabel Roberts**
Wards Affected: **All Wards**
Relevant Scrutiny Committee: **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Urgent Decision: **N** Approval and clearance obtained: **Y**

Date next steps can be taken:
(e.g. referral on of recommendation or implementation of substantive decision) **Hub and Council**

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RECOMMENDATION

That the Hub Committee RECOMMENDS to Council its preferred option for the Northern Outreach Service from the three options set out at paragraph 4 below.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The permanently manned WDBC Okehampton office in St James Street was closed in the Spring of 2018 and replaced by the introduction of a part time service from the Ockment Centre (Minute CM 57 from the Council meeting held on 20 February 2018 refers). Members raised concerns on whether this may have impacted unreasonably on residents in the Okehampton area and the O&S Committee therefore agreed to establish a Task & Finish Group to investigate and report.
- 1.2 Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested in recommendation 1 of the report (Appendix A) that the lead member of Customer First instigates a review on how future service provision in the Okehampton and outlying areas should be provided and brings forward proposals to the Hub Committee.
- 1.3 The report identified that there was very low usage of the service at the Ockment centre. However did highlight concerns about the

customer contacting the council in general. These will be addressed and presented separately under the customer satisfaction improvement programme with monthly reports present to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

2. Analysis of the current service

- 2.1. Officers have continued to record the number of visits, purpose of the visit and also the location from which the customer travelled to visit the Ockment Centre. As a result we now have 11 months of data. This data is included as appendix B. Analysis of this data shows that;
- 2.2. 636 people have visited the Ockment centre since April 2018. An average of 8.8 per day. However of those, 393 people visited to collect recycling boxes as a result of the waste service change. If these are excluded the average reduces to 3.25 per day.
- 2.3 Based on attending site for 8 hours per day (including non-productive travelling time, but not including travelling expenses) the service has cost the equivalent of 576 man-hours.
- 2.4 Excluding the recycling boxes this equates to 243 visits over the same period, equating to seeing a customer every 2.37 hours. At current staff costs this is equivalent to a cost of £43.13 per visit. This does not include travel costs or the cost of the Ockment centre itself.
- 2.5 In the 6 months since officers have been recording where the customer came from to access the service only 14 have visited from the surrounding towns and villages.
- 2.6 The closure of the St James Street Office coincided with the cessation of accepting cash and cheques at the office with customers being required to use alternatives such as the post office or electronic payments. It is clear that this has successfully reduced the footfall of customers visiting for this purpose.
- 2.7 The peer review highlighted the need for the Council to continue to assess its capacity to deliver, stating that "key questions now need to be asked about switching off transactional services once they are fully accessible via the web, in order to realise the efficiency /capacity improvements".
- 2.8 Whilst agencies such as Citizens Advice continue to refer customers to the Ockment Centre service, it should be noted that this agency will, from April 1st 2019, be responsible for providing digital support to customers to complete Universal Credit applications. The funding the Council received for this in 2018/19 will cease. Also from April 1st 2019 the Council will introduce a simplified and improved Council Tax Reduction scheme, which in addition to providing more financial support to its most vulnerable residents, this will reduce the

number of changes to that benefit and therefore reduce contact with the council.

- 2.9 The localities service has and will continue to visit customers that are unable to access services digitally to support them if requested. It should be noted that the service has only carried out 40 such requests across both Councils since April 2018 and this includes the Universal Credit support that will be provided by Citizens Advice from April 2019.
- 2.10 Members at Overview and Scrutiny Committee were concerned that the service at the Ockment Centre was poorly publicised. However officers have confirmed that social media, a press release that was printed in the local newspaper and signs in the St James Street office were displayed. Whilst an A frame board could have been displayed at the Ockment Centre it is unclear whether this would have resulted in more customers using the service and there is little evidence from the survey carried out by the task and finish group that customers who needed to access the service were unable to.

3 Conclusions

- 3.1 It is clear that there has been very little demand for the service since its inception in April 2018. Apart from the recycling box scheme visitor numbers have remained consistently low.
- 3.2 The service is expensive and does not represent value for money for the residents of West Devon Borough Council. Running the service twice weekly has appeared to limit the impact of the Localities service within other areas of the Borough.
- 3.3 Further continued and positive changes by the Council to simplify its services should reduce demand further.
- 3.4 The Council, through the localities team will continue to support customers that cannot access services any other way.

4 Recommendations

- 4.1 There are 3 options that can be considered;
- 4.2 Option 1 - The service is maintained for a further 12 months at a cost of over £11,000 per year and reducing the effectiveness of the current localities service.
- 4.3 Option 2 – The service is reduced to a single day per week and monitored for up to a 6 month period. This option provides some level of support to customers as changes to services highlighted in paragraphs 2.8 and 2.9 are implemented from April 1st 2019.

- 4.4 Option 3 – Withdraw the service from April 1st 2019, enabling the localities service to refocus on wider community engagement within the borough.

6. Implications

Implications	Relevant to proposals Y/N	Details and proposed measures to address
Legal/Governance	N	None
Financial	N	The costs highlighted within the report are within the localities staffing budget.
Risk	Y	A failure to review and act upon the recommendations could lead to: Ineffective use of resources Poor quality service
Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications		
Equality and Diversity		None – Paragraph 2.9 highlights the service offering.
Safeguarding		None – See above
Community Safety, Crime and Disorder		None
Health, Safety and Wellbeing		None – See above
Other implications		None

Appendix

Appendix A – Northern Outreach Task and Finish Report + appendices

Appendix B - Log of visits to Ockment Centre between April 2018 and March