

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1.	Meeting:-	Cabinet Member for Safe & Attractive Neighbourhoods
2.	Date:-	28 th May 2012
3.	Title:-	Neighbourhood Offices Update
4.	Directorate:-	NEIGHBOURHOOD & ADULT SERVICES

5. Summary

On 6th February 2012, Minute No:54 refers, the Director of Housing and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report on the future of Neighbourhood Offices, following the withdrawal of cashiering services at Wath, Rawmarsh, Greasbrough and Kimberworth Park. It was resolved that consultation take place regarding future access arrangements for Housing Services and that a further report be submitted on the outcome of the consultation programme together with proposals for service delivery.

This report provides details on the outcome of the consultation programme and recommendations for the future of the remaining neighbourhood offices and service delivery arrangements.

6. Recommendations

That the Cabinet Member,

- **Notes the proposed redirection of housing services from the four neighbourhood offices and the proposals for alternative service provision detailed in the report.**

7. Proposals and Details

7.1 Background

Following the withdrawal of cashiering services in August 2011, Wath, Rawmarsh, Greasbrough and Kimberworth Park neighbourhood offices have remained open from 8.45am to 4.30pm Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday and from 9am to 6pm on Wednesdays. However, an analysis of the footfall figures of the Neighbourhood Offices (detailed below) has demonstrated that very few customers are visiting the offices, with the majority increasingly using other routes to access services.

In July 2011, the following visits were made by customers to neighbourhood offices:

- Wath 74
- Rawmarsh 159
- Greasbrough 73
- Kimberworth Park Not recorded but generally not as busy as Greasbrough

Since that time there have been a decreasing number of visitors accessing our services at the neighbourhood offices, as detailed below:

	September 2011	December 2011
• Wath	32	1
• Rawmarsh	47	11
• Greasbrough	114	36
• Kimberworth	26	7

The customer access points in the 4 neighbourhood offices are currently being staffed by Housing Champions who, as a result, are unable to spend time on estates, identifying and dealing with housing and estate management issues and supporting customers.

A report on the future of the neighbourhood offices was presented to Cabinet Member on 6th February 2012 (Minute No:54), advising that service access at neighbourhood offices by customers had considerably reduced and alternatives were widely available. It was resolved that consultation take place regarding future access arrangements for housing services, with a further report to be submitted on the outcome of the consultation programme.

7.2 Consultation

A 12 week consultation exercise was undertaken, commencing on 21st February 2012 and concluding on 11th May 2012.

The objectives of the consultation exercise were:-

- To identify preferred access routes for housing services
- To gather opinion on alternative routes for service provision

Consultation was undertaken with key stakeholders and included:-

- Ward Members

- Area Assemblies
- MP's
- Area Housing Panels
- Housing Champions & Housing and Neighbourhood Co-ordinators
- Residents

A variety of consultation methods were used, these included:-

- Customer questionnaires distributed at the neighbourhood offices, the Rotherfed AGM, Area Housing Panel Chairs Meeting and posted on the RMBC website.
- Officer attendance and discussion at Area Assembly Co-ordinating Groups covering Rawmarsh/Wath/Kimberworth Park and Greasbrough.
- Letters sent to Elected Members and MP's
- Staff consultation with Housing Champions/Managers

The results of the consultation exercise can be summarised as follows:-

Consultation with Councillors, MP's and Area Assemblies identified conditional support for the withdrawal of housing services from the 4 neighbourhood offices. Support was offered on the basis that customers were provided with suitable alternative service provision (in particular customer access telephone points) and that the alternative service provision should be in place and operational before the services were withdrawn from the neighbourhood offices. Concerns were raised that the elderly and vulnerable may find any changes difficult therefore particular consideration should be made when considering appropriate provision for this client group.

Staff consultation reflected the decline in footfall at the 4 neighbourhood offices and the desire to better utilise Housing Champions time within the neighbourhoods. Housing Champions were particularly keen to refocus the time spent covering neighbourhood offices on tackling tenancy and estate management issues and supporting customers by spending more time on the estates.

The majority of questionnaires were completed by people who use the service at Neighbourhood Offices. In total, 68 customer questionnaires were received, it should be noted however that these reflect a very small proportion of tenants.

An analysis of the questionnaires showed that:-

- 83.8% (57) respondents said they had visited a neighbourhood office in the last 6 months. Of those 57, Greasbrough was significantly the most popular neighbourhood office with 84.2%, Rawmarsh had 14%, Kimberworth Park 7.8% and Wath 1.8%.
- When asked how often they had visited neighbourhood offices, 78.6% of respondents had visited 4 times or more.
- Respondents were asked for their reasons for visiting the neighbourhood offices. The main reasons identified were; to speak to a Housing Champion (70.9%), to report a repair (58.2%), to use a telephone (36.4%) and to report estate management issues (23.6%).

- Almost 70% of respondents were aware of the alternative ways in which housing services could be accessed. When asked what other service routes they have used/would consider using, 60% said Housing Champion home visits by appointment. Other service routes mentioned were a dedicated housing repairs number (44%), a dedicated number to make other housing enquiries (26%) and facilities at the Customer Service Centres (24%).
- When asked what effect the withdrawal of service provision from the neighbourhood offices would have, 53% said it would have a moderate impact and 19.7% said it would have a serious impact. Of the 48 respondents who said it would have a moderate or serious impact, 7 stated they hadn't visited a neighbourhood office in the last 6 months and another 4 had only visited once or twice. Of the 44 respondents who had visited the Neighbourhood Offices 4 or more times over the past 6 months, over 25% said that it would have only a minor impact or no impact at all.
- The main reasons respondents felt that the redirection of services would have an impact were: issues accessing the customer contact centre, reducing the choice of service access available, their work patterns and not having a home telephone.

In summary, of those customers who responded to the questionnaire, the majority stated they had visited a neighbourhood office 4 times or more within the last six months, regarding tenancy and estate management issues. The most accessed office being the Greasbrough office. The majority of customers were aware of alternative service access routes and would use them but for various reasons chose to visit the office in person. Of those who visited the offices most frequently, the majority felt that a redirection of services from the offices would have an impact upon them.

7.3 Proposals for future service delivery

7.3.1 Key considerations

In considering the proposals set out below, regard has been had to the outcomes of the consultation and the analysis of customer footfall into the offices. In particular:-

- The vast majority of our customers are no longer accessing housing services through neighbourhood offices and footfall continues to be extremely poor. The footfall figures detailed above represent an extremely small number of customers compared to the overall number of tenancies and potential customers within those localities.
- Since the withdrawal of cashiering services in 2011, customers have adopted alternative payment routes available.
- Maintaining an operational presence at neighbourhood offices, 5 days per week, is reliant upon two housing champions being in attendance, which restricts their ability to address issues directly within the neighbourhoods. This is not an efficient use of resources and the costs of maintaining this service provision for a very small number of customers is high.

There is an opportunity cost in staffing neighbourhood offices with Housing Champions. Over a working week, based upon two staff at the four neighbourhood

offices, opening for the hours stated above, 320 hours of officer time per week are expended staffing neighbourhood offices. This time could be better spent on direct customer contact within the neighbourhoods, managing the extensive caseload of estate and tenancy management and anti-social behaviour issues being reported. There are currently 697 cases requiring resolution and closure. In addition, creating time and resource to also proactively pursue estate and tenancy issues and ASB within the neighbourhoods.

There is also a financial cost to maintaining current neighbourhood office arrangements. Maintaining operational facilities in these localities results in revenue costs to the service, for building maintenance and security, utility and office servicing costs etc. This expenditure could potentially be redirected into enhancing service delivery through other routes.

- Consultation with elected members and area assemblies has demonstrated a willingness to support the redirection of services from the offices, provided alternative suitable provision can be made available in advance.
- The majority of customers who access services at the neighbourhood offices are aware of alternative service access routes and would consider using them.

7.3.2 Proposed service delivery arrangements

Currently, in addition to residual service access arrangements at neighbourhood offices, the following alternative service access routes are available for general enquiries, tenancy and estate related issues:-

- Cash payments can be made at various Paypoint locations. Since the withdrawal of payment facilities at neighbourhood offices, customers have accessed a range of alternative payment methods, including Paypoint, direct debit payment, payment in person at Customer Service Centres etc.
- Estate Management Issues can be reported on the new Rotherham Housing Golden Number 01709 336 040 (office hours Monday to Friday 8.30am to 5.30pm)
- General and emergency repairs can be reported on Connect 01709 336 009 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week)
- Free Internet access is available at local libraries. This includes libraries at Wath, Greasbrough, Kimberworth Park and Rawmarsh (based at the new CSC)
- View and bid for properties using Key Choices website or visiting the Property Shop
- Appointments can be made for Housing Champions to visit customers in their own homes or another location if required.
- Housing surgeries are held by Housing Champions periodically in locations around the neighbourhoods, where locally requested and tailored to meet the specific needs of our customers and neighbourhoods. The provision of surgeries would be reviewed periodically to inform ongoing service delivery arrangements.
- Face to face customer services are available centrally at Riverside House; in the north at Swinton CSC and Rawmarsh CSC and in the south of the borough at Dinnington, Maltby CSC and Aston CSC.
- Customer access arrangements are continuously reviewed to ensure customers receive the most suitable and optimum service provision. A review of the Housing Customer Contact Centre arrangements and performance is currently ongoing.

It is therefore proposed that housing services are redirected from the 4 neighbourhood offices, with customer service access being through the alternative service provision detailed above. To support customer access in addition to the alternative service access routes currently available, as detailed above

7.3.3 Wath

It is proposed that the residual housing services delivered from the Wath neighbourhood office cease from July 2012, following the installation of a customer telephone point at Wath library. In addition, the library will also offer:-

- Free internet access to Council website.
- Subject to Cabinet approval, Wath Library will be upgraded to accommodate 18 'hot desks' and interview rooms on the 1st floor. This will enable Housing Champions to have an operational presence at Wath Library, with access to customer interview facilities as required. The proposed timescale for this development is December 2012.

7.3.2 Rawmarsh

The future of the Rawmarsh Neighbourhood Office based services was considered as part of the planning process for the new Rawmarsh Customer Service Centre. Services relocated from the neighbourhood office on Rawmarsh Hill to the new Rawmarsh Customer Service Centre when it opened on 30th April 2012, together with the neighbouring Rawmarsh library. The Rawmarsh CSC service provision includes:-

- A Housing specific Customer Service Assistant to deal with general enquiries.
- An operational base for the Housing Champions, with access to customer interview rooms.

7.3.3 Greasbrough

It is proposed that the residual housing services delivered from the Greasbrough neighbourhood office cease from July 2012, following the installation of a customer telephone point at Greasbrough library. In addition, the library will also offer free internet access.

7.3.4 Kimberworth Park

It is proposed that the residual housing services delivered from the Kimberworth Park neighbourhood office cease from July 2012, following the installation of a customer telephone point at Kimberworth Park library. In addition, the library will also offer free internet access.

Subject to approval, customer information would be made available locally and on the Council website in a timely manner to advise of the proposed changes to service delivery and the new arrangements.

8. Finance

There is a financial cost to maintaining current neighbourhood office arrangements. Maintaining operational facilities in these localities results in revenue costs to the Council, for building maintenance and security, utility and office servicing costs etc. This

expenditure would be significantly reduced, with some residual management and maintenance costs continuing until alternative uses were identified for the premises.

The installation of a VoIP telephone is approximately £300-400 this includes;

- Requirements capture
- Solution build
- Handset
- Licence
- ICT Labour

This is only an indicative cost and the actual price will be subject to a site survey.

The costs of the installation of customer access telephone points will be met from the Corporate change management programme, as part of the roll out of the VoIP system. This has been confirmed by Change Management Section, Resources Directorate and Head of Corporate IT. We are advised that the ongoing corporate programme for the roll out of VoIP will absorb the costs for implementing customer access telephony at libraries as proposed.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

The main risk relates to the lack of support for the proposals to redirect housing services from Neighbourhood Offices. This would impact on the Housing Champions ability to fulfil their main duties resulting in a diminished service within the community.

We will need to ensure telephony access requirements are factored into surveys and requirements gathering exercises for the VoIP roll out.

A review of the library facilities in Rotherham is planned for September 2012, it is anticipated that both Wath Library and Greasbrough Library will be unaffected. There is a possibility however, that Kimberworth Park library may be affected by the review.

10. Background Papers and Consultation

Neighbourhood Offices Cabinet Report - 6th February 2012, Minute No:54
Consultation responses are held on file by the Housing & Communities Service.

Contact Name:- Paul Walsh
Housing and Communities Manager
Ext: 34954
paul.walsh@rotherham.gov.uk