

EAST OFFICERSORDSHIRE BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Cabinet

Date: 13th August 2018

REPORT TITLE: Amendments and Alterations to Customer Service Centre

PORTFOLIO: Housing and Homelessness

HEAD OF SERVICE: Sal Khan

CONTACT OFFICER: Sarah Richardson Ext. No. x1716

WARD(S) AFFECTED: None

1. Purpose of the Report

1.1. To approve the recommendations within the report.

2. Executive Summary

2.1. The Customer Service Centre requires minor alterations to improve the service provided to visitors requiring assistance with their housing needs.

3. Background

3.1. The Customer Service Centre (CSC) in the Market Place, Burton upon Trent, was opened in 2007, providing the face to face service for visitors to the Council. The CSC offers advice and guidance to residents for queries relating to benefits, council tax, planning applications, etc., and also provides tourist information for visitors to East Staffordshire (this list is not exhaustive).

3.2. In 2012, the Housing Options (HO) team were relocated from Trent and Dove Housing Association Offices to the Council. HO officers began to provide housing advice and assistance to residents and homeless people at the CSC soon after. This service provision is now more formalised with four HO officers being located at the CSC on a full time basis.

- 3.3. The Shared Service Centre Manager (Revenues, Benefits & Customer Contacts) (SSCM) conducted a resource review in 2013 which was implemented following consultation with Revenues, Benefits & Customer Contacts (RBCC) officers. Following the review, RBCC officers work at the Town Hall processing accounts and claims, and at the CSC providing advice and guidance on a rota basis. In addition, the Council's switchboard telephones were relocated to the front interview room at the CSC to enable officers in the back office to concentrate on their processing tasks.
- 3.4. HO colleagues see their visitors in the rear interview room at the CSC and on one of the CSC booths. Two further desks in the Manager's area at the CSC have been provided for HO officers to use, where they process homeless applications and deal with telephone enquiries for homeless and housing advice.
- 3.5. Following the introduction of the Housing Reduction Act in April 2018 and the impending implementation of Universal Credit Full Service in November 2018, it has become increasingly necessary to review the service provision of advice and guidance at the CSC. This report asks for approval to make alterations to the CSC which will enable RBCC and HO officers to continue to work in harmony, whilst improving the flow and service to residents and visitors.

4. Contribution to Corporate Priorities

- 4.1. The Corporate Plan for 2018/19 contains the objective VFM54:

Plan for Amendments and Alterations to Customer Service Centre Complete (August 2018)

- 4.2 This is ultimately to agree on the managing of future footfall at the CSC.

5. Report

Current Position

- 5.1. Since 2007, the CSC has received over 424,000 visitors who require advice and assistance with Council and other services. On average, around 41,000 people visit the CSC each year, and that could potentially increase as the Homeless Reduction Act matures and as Universal Credit Full Service is rolled out to East Staffordshire claimants.
- 5.2. There are 16 officer positions at the CSC. RBCC officers fill 12 of those positions with the remaining 4 positions filled by HO officers. RBCC officers cover the front desk, the front interview room (which is where the switchboard telephones are located), 4 booths and 2 desks at the rear of the building. HO officers are split between a booth, a rear interview room and 2 desks at the rear of the building. A plan of the current layout is shown at appendix 1.

- 5.3. HO clients tend to have many personal and disturbing issues which need to be dealt with in a sensitive manner. Current arrangements mean that there is little privacy available for HO clients to be seen and have their issues dealt with accordingly. In addition, there have been a number of incidents recently which have upset other visitors and CSC officers, calling into question the security of the current arrangements.
- 5.4. Officers feel vulnerable when greeting visitors at the front reception desk due to being seated lower than visitors who stand at the desk. Officers also feel vulnerable due to the openness around the reception desk, particularly to the right hand side of the desk where the disabled access point is located. There has also been a number of incidents reported via the Council's VATB procedure where visitors with mental health, alcohol and/or drug issues have caused disturbances needing Police support to remove them from the CSC.

Proposed changes

- 5.5. The SSCM met with Pozzoni Architects to discuss possible alterations that could be made. Pozzoni has provided the Council with assistance on the refurbishments of Shobnall and Uttoxeter Leisure Centres and more recently on the refurbishment of the Town Hall. The alterations needed to provide more private areas for HO clients to be seen, and offer more security to all officers at the CSC whilst continuing to provide the excellent customer service that the CSC is praised for. The resulting proposed alterations are shown at appendix 2.
- 5.6. It is proposed that the front reception desk where officers greet visitors is moved to the side of the reception area, with a hatch opening to one side to allow officers easy access to the reception area and the alarm panel on the front wall of the building. The proposed new reception desk is to be straight rather than curved, of a similar height to the current reception desk but with officers seated on chairs bringing them up to the same height as standing visitors.
- 5.7. There are two public PCs located in the area where the proposed reception desk will be situated, and so it is proposed that those PCs be relocated to the other side of the reception area, still at the front of the building. There are already power and data points situated in that area from former PC stations which previously installed but since removed. That area will also include a new payment kiosk where visitors can pay their Council bills without having to wait for a CSC officer to take their payment.
- 5.8. It is proposed that the area currently used by the curved front reception desk be included in the construction of two new offices at the front of the CSC.
- 5.9. It is proposed that the fifth booth next to the current front switchboard room be removed and the switchboard room be extended to form a room with four desks.
- 5.10. These proposed changes will allow HO officers to utilise two new private interview rooms at the front of the CSC, moving from a booth and the rear

interview room. The other room can then be utilised by further HO officers for telephone calls and processing applications.

- 5.11. The switchboard desks would then be moved to the rear of the building. The officer seating area at the very rear of the building would be moved to the rear interview room, enabling more privacy for staff on their breaks. The seating area would then be utilised to add two desks for the CSC Team Leader and other RBCC Team Leaders to be seated at when present at the CSC.

Feasibility costs

- 5.12. The SSCM instructed Appleyard and Trew LLP to conduct a feasibility cost report based on the design proposals prepared by Pozzoni Architecture. The report is shown at appendix 3.
- 5.13. The feasibility report shows a potential total cost of £86,644 for the alterations. It should be noted that a substantial portion of the costs is accounted for by Mechanical and Engineering costs (£14,840) but the report includes a cost of £5,000 for a 'new payment kiosk'. A payment kiosk has already been purchased separately to this project and is currently in the process of being installed at the CSC. Therefore reference to those costs can be ignored.
- 5.14. The feasibility report also shows an estimate of £10,000 for working out of normal working hours. This may be reduced if the Council allows a closure period.
- 5.15. A contingency fee has been estimated to be 10% of the cost of the alterations (£8,000) and a similar amount for Professional Fees. There will be a requirement for a Building Control application (around £600), new chairs for the new reception desk (£400) and a screen for the Manager's area (£100). There should be minimal ICT costs due to network points and cables already being in place. Costs which are yet unknown could include a detailed asbestos report.

Next steps

- 5.16. Three building contractors were engaged with and asked to provide quotes for the alterations: Novus Solutions, Forbes West and G. Taylor & Son Ltd. All three contractors have worked with the Council on other contracts. All three contractors were asked to provide quotes which included working outside normal working hours. The three quotes provided are shown in table 1:

Table 1 – Initial quotes

Novus Solutions	£209,302.00
Forbes West	£61,911.54
G.Taylor & Son Ltd	£47,856.32

- 5.17. As the quote from Novus Solutions was far in excess of the costs shown in the feasibility report, it was decided not to continue with any further engagement with that contractor. The remaining contractors (Forbes West and G.Taylor &

Son Ltd) were invited individually to meet with the SSCM and CSC Team Leader to discuss their relevant quote to ensure all requirements were met.

- 5.18. Both contractors were asked to estimate the length of time it would take to complete the alterations. Both contractors indicated that the majority of the work would be the removal of the curved front desk and the construction of the new rooms which would take around 5 days to complete. The construction of the new reception desk would be completed offsite and would be fitted alongside the remaining interior works. Total time taken would be around 2 to 3 weeks.
- 5.19. Following those discussions, both contractors provided revised quotes, and those results are shown in table 2:

Table 2 – Revised quotes

Forbes West	£55,132.62
G.Taylor & Son Ltd	£29,900.00

- 5.20. Adding on 10% contingency fees and 10% professional fees to the quote provided by Forbes West would be a reasonable estimate. That would lead the potential cost to engage that contractor to £65,396.62
- 5.21. Adding 10% contingency fees and 10% professional fees to the quote provided by G.Taylor & Son Ltd might be an underestimation, therefore an estimated £5,000 for each would seem appropriate. This would bring the potential cost to engage that contractor to £39,900.00.

6. Options

Option 1 – Do nothing

- 6.1. The current arrangements are not working efficiently. We are not able to offer support to our most vulnerable visitors in a secure and professional way. The Council's responsibilities under the Homeless Reduction Act will be more difficult to manage if the alterations are not made.

Option 2 – Approve the alterations

- 6.2. This is the preferred option and the one recommended for approval. It will enable visitors to the CSC to be managed more efficiently and will also provide more private interviewing facilities for HO officers, which will enable the Council to manage its responsibilities under the Housing Reduction Act more responsibly. The alterations will also help the Council manage the provision of advice and guidance to other visitors to the CSC, particularly when Universal Credit Full Service is rolled out within East Staffordshire.
- 6.3. It is recommended that Cabinet note the proposed appointment of contractor G. Taylor & Sons Ltd to undertake the alteration building works.

7. **Financial Considerations**

This section has been approved by the following member of the Financial Management Unit: Lisa Turner, Chief Accountant

7.1. The main financial issues arising from this Report are as follows:

Option 2 – approve the alterations

Capital	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Building Works	29,900.00	n/a	n/a
Estimated Professional Fees and Contingency Fees	10,000.00		
Total	39,900.00		

7.2 There are New Burdens funds available from Housing Options and Housing Benefits. It has been agreed with the Housing Options Manager that HO could be utilised to fund 50% of the costs with the remaining 50% potentially funded by Housing Benefits.

8. **Risk Assessment and Management**

8.1. The main risks to this Report and the Council achieving its objectives are as follows:

8.2. **Positive** (Opportunities/Benefits):

8.2.1. The alterations will enable the Council to manage its responsibilities under the Housing Reduction Act, providing privacy and security to HO clients.

8.2.2. The alterations will enable the Council to manage other visitors to the Council more efficiently which will help once Universal Credit Full Service is rolled out in East Staffordshire.

8.3. **Negative** (Threats):

8.3.1. If the alterations are not approved, it will make it difficult for officers to effectively manage clients and visitors to the CSC.

8.3.2. The Council's responsibilities under the Homeless Reduction Act could be hampered.

8.3.3. Utilising Housing Reduction Act funding to support indirect costs will reduced the availability of resources to meet future direct costs of homelessness.

8.4. The risks do not need to be entered in the Risk Register. Any financial implications to mitigate against these risks are considered above.

9. **Legal Considerations**

*This section has been approved by the following member of the Legal Team:
Angela Wakefield, Solicitor to the Council, Monitoring Officer.*

9.1. There are no significant legal issues arising from this Report.

10. **Equalities and Health**

10.1. **Equality impacts:** The subject of this Report is not a policy, strategy, function or service that is new or being revised. An equality and health impact assessment is not required.

10.2. **Health impacts:** The outcome of the health screening question does not require a full Health Impact Assessment to be completed. An equality and health impact assessment is not required.

11. **Human Rights**

11.1. There are no Human Rights issues arising from this Report.

12. **Sustainability** (including climate change and change adaptation measures)

12.1. Does the proposal result in an overall positive effect in terms of sustainability (including climate change and change adaptation measures) N/A

13. **Recommendation(s)**

13.1. That Cabinet approve Option 2 at paragraph 6.2 of the report, including an addition of £39,900 to the Capital Programme to be met from new burdens funding.

13.2. That Cabinet approve the alterations to be made to the Customer Service Centre as shown in appendix 2 and detailed in paragraphs 5.6, 5.7, 5.8, and 5.9.

13.3. That Cabinet note the proposed appointment of G. Taylor & Sons Ltd to complete the alterations works, as in paragraph 6.3 of the report.

14. **Appendices**

- 14.1. Appendix 1: Current layout of CSC.
- 14.2. Appendix 2: Proposed plan of alterations.
- 14.3. Appendix 3: Appleyard & Trew LLP Feasibility Report.