

# **NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

## **POLICY & RESOURCES CABINET BOARD**

**7<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

### **REPORT OF THE HEAD OF FINANCIAL SERVICES**

#### **SECTION A – MATTER FOR DECISION**

##### **WARDS AFFECTED**

All

##### **Alternative service delivery Proposals for Port Talbot Civic Centre Council Tax Enquiries.**

###### **Purpose of Report**

1. This report proposes an alternative service delivery arrangement for dealing with Council Tax enquiries at Port Talbot Civic Centre.

###### **Background**

2. Since April 2014 five posts have been lost in the Council Tax section due to budget cuts. Whilst we have streamlined processes and introduced more efficient ways of working to bill and collect Council Tax there is a constant pressure on resources available. The Council Tax section is responsible for billing over 65,000 householders, with a projected collectable debit of just over £70 million. The current Council Tax collection rate is 98% which is the 3<sup>rd</sup> best in Wales.

###### **Current Service Arrangements**

3. The Council Tax section employs a total of 24 staff (22.1 FTE) who are located in Neath Civic Centre. On a rota basis one member of staff works out of Port Talbot Civic Centre to provide face to face contact service with the public. On Tuesday's of each week Housing Benefit staff provide a service at the Contact Hub at Pontardawe and will direct customers to a telephone service with staff based at Neath Civic.

4. The following table summarises the volumes of work carried out by the section and One Stop Shop. Members will note that the majority of contact is via the telephone and issuing documents (including 25,452 amended bills, 5,363 new bills, 10,263 reminder letters, 4,590 summonses, 3,572 liability orders, 2,416 letters of information, 6,316 exemption letters, etc)

	Total	Pontardawe	Neath	Port Talbot
Property Numbers	65,831	10,245	31,526	23,880
Contact Volumes 1 April to 31 Oct 2017				
Documents Issued	87,638			
Telephone calls made	15,768			
Telephone calls received on dedicated number 686188	27,849			
Average daily visitor numbers		2 (Tuesday only)	19 (OSS)	9

5. Currently a member of the Council Tax team provides a face to face service at Port Talbot Civic Centre for Council Tax enquiries. The average number of callers a day taken over a 3 month period is 9, this average increases slightly when recovery documents are issued. Dealing with the public face to face is the most expensive method of resolving queries. Generally accepted SOCITM benchmarking costs per customer transaction are £8.62 for face to face, £2.83 for telephone and £0.15 for web. For the numbers involved, providing a face to face service in Port Talbot is not the best use of limited and decreasing resources
6. With a further reduction in staff budgeted for 2018/19 it is essential that we look to maximise staff output and make best use of valuable staff resources. Staff time is more efficiently spent in the Neath office where work can be allocated, prioritised and monitored according to daily demand. The member of staff currently manning the Council Tax enquiry counter in Port Talbot cannot be logged onto the telephony service and unable to take calls from the public; their tasks are limited as they have to be available to interview the public when they present themselves.

7. This is not the best of use of a valuable resource and by providing an alternative, more cost efficient method of contact for taxpayers visiting the Port Talbot office, it will release staff time to dedicate to tasks that have a greater impact for the section.

### **Proposed Service Delivery Arrangements.**

#### **8. Telephony Service**

Two trials of withdrawing a face to face service have been undertaken; the first for the period 12<sup>th</sup> July 2017 to the 21<sup>st</sup> July 2017, a period of 8 working days. In its place a telephony service was offered. Customers entered the Council Tax interview rooms in Port Talbot Civic Centre and there were written instructions to ring the back office located in Neath Civic Centre.

For the period of the trial 81 customers visited the Council Tax Section in Port Talbot, 84% of enquiries were resolved over the phone by staff in the Neath Office. There were 13 customers who went to the one stop shop for assistance. A breakdown of their enquiries / grievances are detailed below-

<b>Number of callers</b>	<b>Reason for visiting One Stop Shop</b>
1	Partially sighted, could not read instructions to ring the Council Tax Office
5	Customer wanted to speak to a member of staff face to face and not over the telephone
1	Required a form to apply for a discount
2	Wanted to hand in information
3	Required a copy of their Council Tax bill
1	Required Council Tax reference to pay his bill

Of the 5 customers who wanted to speak to a member of staff face to face, 4 did eventually use the telephone and spoke to the back office and had their query resolved.

The One Stop Shop staff assisted with the remaining 8 customer enquiries.

As a result of the feedback from this first exercise, a second trial was undertaken again offering a telephony service instead of face to face. This trial was carried out between the 24<sup>th</sup> November

2017 and 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2017, a period of 21 working days. In addition, as part of this trial, some basic information on the customers was gathered such as their age and whether they considered themselves to be disabled. Details of this trial are included as an appendix to this report, but the main findings are as follows:

- The total number of customers who came to Port Talbot Civic Centre with Council Tax queries was 98 at an average of just less than 5 per day.
- Of these 13 (13%) considered themselves to be disabled.
- Of those that responded to the questions asked by staff, 79 (98%) said that their query had been resolved to their satisfaction.
- Of those that responded to the questions asked by staff, 77 (95%) said that they had found the signage and process easy to follow

A telephony service in preference to a face to face service would enable better use of staff resources and would not lead to a reduction in service to the customer, and additional comments made during the trials would be taken on board as part of the change. Enquiries would still be dealt with by an experienced member of the section and we would still aim to resolve the queries at the first point of contact.

Further, when the Council's proposed new telephony system is in place a skype facility will also be made available for customers who visit Port Talbot Civic Centre to deal with the Council Tax staff in Neath.

The section will provide a face to face service at Port Talbot at times when increased footfall is expected e.g. at billing issue in March and when the first reminder for the year is issued (May).

## **9. Self Service – Digital Solutions**

In combination with a telephony service the Council Tax section is also seeking to make greater use of digital technology. As part of the Authorities Digital by Choice programme a significant amount

of work has been undertaken on the Council Tax Website allowing customers to access information and advice easily 24hours a day, reducing the demand on staff time.

Priority has been given to providing a digital solution to enquiries with the highest transactions. There are now 19 on-line intelligent based forms available covering the most popular discounts, exemptions, change of address and direct debit applications. It is the intention to promote the use of these on line services to reduce unnecessary contact with staff which will free up resources to deal with other tasks. The processing of the on-line forms cannot be automated but staff will be able to deal with these applications at a time suitable to the section rather than responding to customer demand by telephone or face to face which requires an instant response.

It is of course important to recognise that some customers will not be able to access the digital service available, these customers will still be able to receive an excellent service over the telephone.

### **Financial Impact**

10. Financial impact is as set out in this report. The proposal will make better use of limited resources.

### **Equality Impact Assessment**

11. An equality impact screening was carried out on this proposal which concluded that an Equality Impact Assessment would not be required. Council Tax enquirers can continue to visit Port Talbot Civic Centre and will be able to discuss their query via the telephone with a Council Tax officer.

### **Workforce impacts**

12. One member of staff works out of Port Talbot on a rota basis. Staff have been consulted on this proposal. There are no adverse impacts on the workforce from this proposal.

### **Legal Impacts**

13. There are no legal impacts in respect of this item.

## **Risk Management**

14. There are no risk management issues in respect of this item.

## **Consultation**

15. Two separate trials of this proposal have been undertaken.

## **Recommendation**

16. It is recommended that Members agree to remove a face to face service for Council Tax enquiries in Port Talbot Civic Centre and to replace the service with a telephony and digital solution.

## **Reasons for Proposed Decision**

17. To release valuable staff resources to undertake other duties rather than providing an expensive face to face service where staff are limited in the tasks they can do whilst waiting to assist the next customer.

## **Implementation of Decision**

18. The decision is proposed for immediate implementation.

## **Appendix**

19. Council Tax Queries from Port Talbot Office - period 24.11.17 to 22.12.17

## **Officer Contact**

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## APPENDIX

### Council Tax Queries from Port Talbot Office - period 24.11.17 to 22.12.17

Period	Number of queries	Age of customer		Age of customer over 50	Considered Disabled	Query resolved to customers satisfaction?		Was the signage and process easy to follow?	
		18-30	31-50			Column1	Column2	Column1	Column2
						Yes	No	Yes	No
24.11.17 (1 day)	3	1	2	0	0	3	0	3	0
27.11.17 to 01.12.17	38	5	10	15	3	25	1	27	1
04.12.17 to 08.12.17	24	2	10	12	3	28	0	26	1
11.12.17 to 15.12.17	23	2	7	8	3	16	1	15	1
18.12.17 to 22.12.17	10	1	2	5	4	7	0	6	1
	98	11	31	40	13	79	2	77	4

#### Comments made by customers

My query has been dealt with but I would rather have seen a person face to face.

I was unsure what to do as I expected to see a person.

I am disappointed that there was no person to see in Port Talbot.

I am not happy that there is no officer available in Port Talbot to speak to.

I couldn't work out where to go but a housing benefit officer explained I needed to use the phone in the room.

You need bigger signage in the reception area for Council Tax.

I would prefer to speak to someone face to face in the interview room.

My query has been dealt with but I would rather have seen a person face to face.

#### Additional comments

A gentleman was hard of hearing and could not use the telephone.

A gentleman was in a disability scooter and could not access the room to ring without help.