

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cabinet

21st March 2022

Joint report from Huw Jones, Chief Finance Officer / Chris Owen, Chief Digital Officer

Matter for Decision

Wards Affected: All Wards

Proposed Service Model for Civic Centre Customer Services and Cash Desks

Purpose of the Report:

1. To provide elected Members with an overview of the Neath Port Talbot Council's proposed service model for Customer Services and the Cash Desks when we reopen the buildings to the public.

Executive Summary:

2. Since the outbreak of the Covid pandemic the two Civic Centres have been closed to the public. Consideration now needs to be given as to the services that will be provided when the buildings re-open to the public.

Background

3. In February 2020 an information report was submitted to Cabinet, outlining the service and functions provided by the Customer Services section including the front of house services. The services provided by front of house services prior to the Covid pandemic were:

- Acting as the main reception point for Neath Civic and Port Talbot Civic, providing advice and guidance on a range of council services and sign posting of customers to the relevant service areas
- Blue Badge Services
- Independent Disabled Parking Spaces
- Bus Pass Renewals and Enquiries (this service has largely moved to Transport for Wales with only some queries being dealt with by Customer Services).

The Situation since March 2020

4. The pandemic and lockdowns over the past 18+ months have transformed how the council engages with the community. Service delivery processes have been streamlined with a move to a digital first model, where members of the public can find information or consume services from a variety of online channels.
5. Since March 2020 Customer Services have maintained a full range of support services across telephony and digital channels. This service models will continue to operate on a continuous improvement basis.
6. Both cash desks have remained closed during this time with the public utilising the various alternative methods of payment available, this has included a 5% increase in the number of people paying their Council Tax by Direct Debit.

Proposed Service Model from April 2022

7. It is currently proposed that there will be a first phase re-opening of the two Civic Centres at the beginning of March following a detailed Health and Safety Risk Assessment carried out by our Facilities Team. Pontardawe One Stop Shop will remain closed.
8. When buildings re-open it is inevitable that customers will return to request a wide range of services even where those services are readily and easily accessible online.
9. The revised process for Customer Services engagement will remain similar to pre-pandemic where staff at Neath and Port Talbot will be the first point of contact to support our customers, in accessing a wide range of Council Services including:
 - General Enquiries – Customers will be sign posted to the contact channels available for the relevant service areas. Requests for services which are available on-line - Customers will be offered a digital assist service to allow them to self-serve. If a customer is unable to complete the transaction then Customer Services will offer support.
 - Staff visitors – An enhanced self-service system will be installed to allow visitors to register attendance via a digital self-assist service with a notification sent to their host. Customer Services will continue to provide a back-up should there be any registration issues.
 - Direct support for the following:
 - Blue Badges
 - Independent Disabled Parking Permits
 - Recycling / Waste Support
 - Tell Us Once

10. In relation to the two cash desks it is proposed that these will not re-open to the public. If Members of the public enter the building with the intention of using the cash desks, Customer Services staff will re-direct to the alternative methods of payments outlined in Appendix 1.
11. Since the outbreak of the pandemic the number of customers paying their Council Tax has by direct debit has increased by 5%, there has also been an increase in the amount paid at Post Offices. The overall amount of council tax collected has not been impacted by the closure of the cash offices. There have also been very few complaints from members of the public regarding the unavailability of the cash desks. At the start of the pandemic there were some enquiries regarding alternative payment methods but since then there has been very little.
12. Officers will continue to monitor this situation and adjust service provision as required, which will include reviewing the need for the cash desks to reopen.

What happens next?

13. Subject to the above proposal being agreed by Cabinet there are a number of logistical issues which will need to be addressed:
 - There is a lead time to ensure that all environments are safe and that processes are clear and confirmed. Officers are already developing working arrangements and reviewing risk assessments with a view to reopening in April 2022.
 - The number of customers who can be safely accommodated in the reception space will need to be confirmed by the facilities team in line with Welsh Government guidelines. Whilst guidelines on social distancing are in force, we will need to limit the number of customers in the reception areas and may require the use of building access controls to support.

- Improved signage has been commissioned to manage visitor expectations in terms of the services they can access within the Civic buildings.
- All staff will be reminded not to use the main entrances for entry to buildings, as members of the public are likely to follow them in.
- Service areas will need to review and publish updated contact channels for their customers and ensure that these channels are resourced appropriately.
- Updates to the corporate website regarding what services are available in which channels needs to be sent out in advance of sites re-opening to manage public expectations.
- Interview rooms will have voice and video communications installed which will enable members of the public to interact with back office staff who are not in that building. This will be facilitated by customer service staff.
- There will be an on-going review of the operating arrangements with adjustments implemented where necessary.

Financial Impacts:

14. There are no financial impacts associated with this report.

Integrated Impact Assessment:

15. A first stage Integrated Impact Assessment has been completed, with a second stage assessment deemed not required.

Valleys Communities Impacts:

16. There are no valley communities impacts associated with this report.

Workforce Impacts:

17. There are no workforce impacts associated with this report.

Legal Impacts:

18. There are no legal impacts associated with this report.

Risk Management Impacts:

19. There are no risk management impacts associated with this report.

Consultation:

20. There is no requirement for external consultation on this item.

Recommendations:

21. It is recommended that members approve the proposed service model from April 2022.

Reason for Decision:

To allow the reopening of the Civic buildings to the public, in a controlled and managed way.

Implementation of Decision:

The decision is for implementation after the three day call in period.

Appendices:

Appendix 1 - NPT available payment methods

List of background papers: None

Officer Contact:

Huw Jones
Chief Finance Officer
Tel: 01639 683575
h.jones@npt.gov.uk

Chris Owen
Chief Digital Officer
Tel: 01639 686217
c.m.owen@npt.gov.uk

Appendix 1 – Available Payment Methods

	Internet	Cheque to Civic Centre (Post or drop off in post box outside)	Over the phone to individual department	Automated Telephone line (0161 622 6919)	Direct Debit	Bank Transfer quoting reference number	Post Office (Cash, Cheque, Card)
Council Tax	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Benefit Over payments	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
NNDR (Business Rates)	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Debtor Invoices	X	X	X	X	X	X	Will be available when new system goes live (pre-Christmas)
Penalty Charge Notices (Parking Tickets)	X	X	X			X	
Pest Control	X	X	X				
BID (Business Improvement District Levy)		X	X		X	X	