

Organisation Development Programme Update: External Focus

Summary

1. This report provides an update on resident interaction with the council and its commissioned services over recent months, plans for the next phase of the government roadmap out of lockdown and beyond.

Customer Services

2. Customer Services has provided triage and signposting during the Covid pandemic through its dedicated phone line and email inbox. The numbers have now significantly reduced with very few calls or emails received on a daily or weekly basis. The intention is to close these access points at Step 4 of the roadmap. These can be reopened in the future should the necessity arise.
3. In terms of non-covid services, the Customer Centre moved to home working supported by the council's ICT service very quickly after the first lockdown in March 2020. This was a seamless move from a customer perspective and had no detrimental impact on the access channels of phone, web and web chat. The customer centre at West Offices reopened on the 17th April 2020 to customers on an appointment only basis as it had operated pre-covid. The footfall and appointment demand has remained low assisted by the successful moving of parking permits online during lockdown. Where customers have no digital access the same service is available by phone.
4. Across the pandemic the broader Customer and Revenues Services have provided Winter Support Grants, Test & Trace Isolation Grants and York Financial Assistance Scheme (YFAS) payments to in excess of 3,000 families providing £1.2m of financial support. A further £1.1m of Hardship Support has been provided to over 5.5k customers receiving Council Tax Support (CTS).
5. As we continue through the recovery steps the Government has provided a Local Covid Support Grant to replace the former Winter Support Grant and applications continue to be received for support with utility bills and

food. This scheme is currently due to close on 20th June 2021 but Government have indicated they may yet continue it across the summer.

6. The council restructure and creation of the Customer & Communities Directorate has allowed for a much more joined up approach to providing a better customer journey and work is ongoing to look at how the most benefit can be delivered from the new structure.
7. The income services side of Customer Services has staff at York Hospital, Sure Start Centre and working in the community including our adult social care customers. The new directorate provides much more direct access to Council Tax, and Welfare Benefits Staff including Housing Benefit, Discretionary Housing Payments and YFAS to our residents. The community based services (Local Area Co-ordinators and Hubs) were already working closely with the welfare support services but the restructure provides more synergy at both management and operational levels. It also allows for more agile changes in the way we work in having a single management team that supports all our residents.
8. Where required the Court of Protection Service also operates within the new directorate. The provides support to residents who do not have the mental capacity to make decisions for themselves and have no family or family members willing to do this on their behalf. Having the communities teams working within the same directorate helps in identifying these issues and provides a much more holistic service to address residents' needs.
9. The York Crematorium has continued to operate through the pandemic. The number of mourners allowed in the main chapel continues to be restricted (18) due to social distancing rules until Step 4 and charges for funerals remain reduced until that point, with free recordings of funeral services provided.
10. The Register Office has continued to operate through the pandemic but is now open for weddings although numbers are restricted by social distancing rules and Government guidelines until Step 4.
11. The Mansion House reopened on 19th of May. Access for customers is pre-booked and free flow through the House. To recognize and reward residents and Key Workers access is free until 31st May. Many of the days have been fully booked helping to bring the House back to life.

Hubs

12. The Communities & Equalities team continue to operate a network of five virtual hubs (Tang Hall, York Travellers Trust Clifton, Foxwood Community Centre, Clements Hall and Haxby Memorial Hall) managed by up to 10 CYC staff per day and supported by a body of dedicated “hub volunteers”.
13. In 2021 the virtual hubs have been principally concerned with:
 - supporting the clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) and others who were referred for support in earlier lockdowns
 - developing proactive community schemes for example around food to respond to local need.

Where once there were also a significant number of requests for help routed to hubs via the Customer Centre, these have now largely dried up.

14. Shielding of the CEV came to an end on 31 March 2021 although local authorities continue to be required to make provision to support those having to self-isolate.
15. Our intention will be to resume the roll out of physical hubs at the earliest possible time; however, this is clearly dependent on the government’s road map. There is therefore a danger of a hiatus in support for residents at a time when it is clear that there are issues around mental health and wellbeing caused by isolation, financial and other pressures associated with the pandemic and that these are exacerbated by the disruption to normal community support mechanisms.
16. To address these needs a transitional approach is being taken to support individuals and communities, moving away from crisis support and seeking to build resilient support networks. In this approach:
 - Community Hubs will work with ward teams in each ward to link existing community groups with those that have been formed in support of the Covid response with the aim of establishing a network of trusted community groups that will provide support to residents and using ward budgets to fill identified gaps in local provision.
 - Hub managers are currently working to identify those who may benefit from engaging with a local hub longer-term and starting to interact with them by virtual means such as weekly wellbeing calls and socially distanced doorstep chats.
 - The hubs commissioning budget will be used to commission provision from partners, primarily in the voluntary and community sector, to meet identified cross-city needs.

- As lockdown restrictions ease the hubs will start to build to ensure there is a community hub for each ward offering a physical meeting place for local people to come together, and filling in the gaps between existing community venues.
 - When residents have Council Tax or rent arrears this will be used as a trigger point for contact with hubs as it indicates potential longer term challenges. This will provide the main front door for residents in crisis.
 - Investment in benefits and financial advice capacity and the commissioning of Citizens Advice to provide outreach services in the hubs will further strengthen this approach.
 - Live Well York is surveying partners and citizens with regard to community provision available to address social isolation. We will support to ensure that provision can operate in a covid-safe way. Community mapping is also being developed to provide residents with a visual representation of support and community offers available to them across each ward.
17. Once community venues and existing hubs are fully open once more we will be able to return to the original ambition, as set out in November 2019, of establishing a “Good Place” peer support network, which all community venues will be invited to join, together with a York Community Hubs accreditation scheme, which will recognise the work and achievements of the venue and its volunteers and also let local residents know what they can expect from their local community facility.

Commissioned Services

18. **Leisure centres:** These reopened in April 2021 for gym, swimming, sports lessons and courts. From 17 May, indoor fitness classes, adult swimming lessons and courses, birthday parties and soft play resumed.
19. **Libraries:** Explore libraries had been open as an essential service with the exception of the reading cafés that reopened on 17 May.
20. **Museums:** There is a different position with respect to each institution:
- Castle Museum: Opened on 17th May with Tours until the 21st June. Open with managed free flow until the 31st July and full free flow from 1 August. Opening remains on 5 days per week.
 - Yorkshire Museum: Opening on 9th July with managed free flow, full free flow from the 1st of August. It will open with the Richard III exhibition, five days per week with charging for admission.

- Art Gallery: Opening on 28th May, five days per week. Opening with managed free flow and then full free flow from the 1st of August. The Gallery opens with Grayson Perry and Aesthetica 2021. Free entry to permanent exhibition galleries with charging at different amounts for special exhibitions.

Contact Details

Author:

Charlie Croft
Assistant Director

David Walker
Head of Customer &
Exchequer Services

Chief Officer Responsible for the report:

Pauline Stuchfield
Director of Customer and Communities

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Wards Affected: *List wards or tick box to indicate all*

All

For further information please contact the author of the report