

	
Cabinet	4 th October 2011
Report of the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services	

ACCESS TO CUSTOMER RECEPTION SERVICES IN ACOMB

Summary

1. As part of our commitment to improve and provide greater choice to residents in how they can access the council's services and in preparation for the new single customer reception service at West Offices due to open in 2013, work has been ongoing to consider how we continue to provide excellent customer access for customers in Acomb.
2. This report sets out the details of the service that is provided within Acomb and how that compares to the rest of the city along with the results of recent customer surveys. It also suggests options to improve forms of access for Housing & Benefits services through provision of services in a community setting, which will also help to inform plans for all customers across the city. These will deliver the council's ambitions to 'Build Strong Communities' and is completely aligned to its approach to neighbourhood working which includes the delivery of well co-ordinated services at a local level.
3. Members are asked to consider how these services can best be provided in future to meet the continuing needs for local residents whilst ensuring that the model can be replicated across the city, choice is maximised and there is efficient use of council property.

Current Service Provision

4. The council currently provides three customer facing customer access points within Acomb, two from the current Acomb Office: Housing Services and Housing & Council Tax Benefits Service, both these receptions also deal with signposting of wider council inquiries. A general information and signposting enquiry desk is also provided at Acomb Explore. Acomb is the only area within the

city to have a stand alone council reception service. Residents in all other areas of York use facilities in the city centre if they wish to speak to someone in person.

5. The current Acomb Office is occupied by Housing Services, Tenancy and Asset Management teams and Occupational Therapy (OT) staff. The Housing Tenancy team work predominantly at that side of the city, the Asset Management team and the Occupational Therapists work city wide. The OT teams do not provide a service through the public reception at Acomb Office.
6. The reception functions are provided by the Housing & Benefits services and staff rotate to provide a daily service. There are normally two staff on site to cover each reception.

Future Service Provision

7. Housing Services has for some time been looking at relocating the asset management and maintenance staff to a single service co-located with the building works team at the Eco Depot that carry out the responsive repairs service. This will provide a more efficient and consistently provided service to all housing residents in York. The team planned to move week commencing 26th September 2011, vacating approximately 43% of the back office accommodation.
8. As part of their preparation for the move to West Offices, Housing Services have for some time been looking at how it delivers the whole housing service in the future. A key focus of their review is how to make the service more local through delivery in a community setting whilst at the same time reaping the benefits from a single co-located team in West Offices. The current space planning for Housing Services includes housing staff based in the Acomb office following the opening of West Offices. When the tenancy team move out this will result in 70% of the back office space not being utilised.
9. Work is currently underway to consider more flexible ways of working, whereby key customer facing staff can work more within the communities from existing community buildings, for example community centres and children's centres. It is proposed that housing staff will hold weekly surgeries in the communities thereby providing a more localised service to customer.

10. Discussions with the Adults, Children's & Education directorate have highlighted that the longer term plans for the Occupational Therapists are still not totally clear, there is a desire for the team to be in West offices, alongside their other management teams, however there are still significant issues that need to be resolved relating to accessing cars (to transport small equipment to customers homes) and we may have to look at an alternative options for them.

Opportunities for Future Service Delivery in Acomb

11. The council is refocusing its Customer Strategy 'to ensure that we value every customer transaction', we need to ensure that our customer services strategy delivers what local people value. It must provide a framework to enable us to be proactive and responsive to changing demands, as well as providing focus and drive on key priorities. In addition, in the current financial environment it must ensure we make the most of every penny we spend.'
12. Within our revised strategy we set out that we will deliver face to face facilities that:
 - Ensure effective use of all local touch points across the city
 - Deliver joined up service delivery with partners under one roof
 - Provide a convenient city centre location, with access to all touch points and all tiers of service
 - Maximise local assets and touch points through our libraries and family & community centres.
13. The telephone is an important access channel for the majority of our customers and we need to ensure the service provided is quick and effective and that everything can be dealt with in one place and we have plans in place to deliver this as a priority over the coming year.
14. The digitising of services allows for delivery in ways that are more convenient for our customers, thus making life easier for busy people and those people who may have difficulty in accessing face to face or voice services This includes use of web and mobile phone technologies.

Consultation

15. To ensure that any decision made with regards to the future delivery of reception services within Acomb has customers at the heart of the process, a face to face consultation exercise was undertaken for a period of 10 days, between 30th August and up to and including 12th September 2011. The consultation took the form of a face to face exit interview at both the existing Acomb office and Acomb Explore (copies of the questionnaires are available on request).
16. As part of its ongoing service improvements work, Housing Services regularly carry out analysis of the customer foot fall to its reception. Over the first 24 weeks of the current financial year, the foot fall has been on average 25 customers a day.
17. On average the Housing & Council Tax Benefits service footfall is 17 per day. This would give a total average of 42 customers a day, however during the survey period when the majority of customers were surveyed, the numbers averaged at around 25 a day¹. The city centre receptions receive an average 255 customers a day, 140 relating to housing and benefits (based on August 2011 figures during a holiday period), with an appointments system in place for benefits services.
18. In total 509 interviews were carried out, 190 at Acomb Office and 248 at Acomb Explore and 64 via telephone. 7 further surveys were completed by parents attending children's centres in the area. When considering the statistical reliability of the result, the overall results are accurate to within +/- 4.4%, within the industry accepted standard of +/- 5%. The map at Annex A shows the postcode distribution of those interviewed at Acomb Office, and almost exclusively customers were from the immediate local area. The sample size for the map was 210, as not all customers provided their postcodes.
19. When considering the frequency of visits to the Acomb Office, 32% were visiting for the first time, and 49% visited less than once a month, 49% of customers walked to the office and just over three quarters, 76% of customers also visited the local shops at the same time.

¹ It is acknowledged that the consultation period was during the holiday period and this may have affected the number of customers visiting the office.

20. The level of customer satisfaction with the council's ability to deal with their enquiry was high with 79% of enquiries been fully dealt with at that visit, and 14% partially dealt with arrangements made for a member of staff to contact the customer.
21. Customers were asked to identify their preferred method of contact with the council, when considering their first choice, 62% of customers stated face to face, 29% Telephone, 9% Online / internet. When combining first and second preference, 82% stated face to face contact.
22. Where customers had expressed face to face contact as their preferred method of contact, customers were then asked to identify which was more important, that it was available in the centre of Acomb, that it was available along side other council services or available in the city centre (customers were able to highlight more than one). Of the total sample, 73% of customers stated available in the centre of Acomb, 43% said along side other council services and 19% felt that it could be in the city centre.
23. Customers who visited the Acomb office were asked if they used Acomb Explore, only 43% said yes. On the reverse, when customers of Acomb Explore were asked if they used the Acomb office, only 9% said yes.
24. Additional telephone interviews were also held with Housing/Benefits customers with protected characteristics under equalities legislation, and a separate focus group held with local residents associations. The equalities impacts are contained in an Equalities Impact Assessment for this review and residents associations broadly reflected the desire for continued face to face contact in Acomb.
25. As can be seen, the customer consultation described above indicates a strong preference for a retained face to face service; the key question is therefore how this is delivered. When considering the potential for a stand alone customer access / reception service, the foot fall in the current Acomb office is low, and as a result is expensive to deliver. The existing plans for Housing Services is for the service to be delivered more locally in a community setting with estate based surgeries. Proposals are now also being developed for the Housing & Council Tax benefit service to be delivered more

locally and in a joined up way with other services as part of the council's emerging neighbourhood working approach.

Options

26. **Option 1** – To continue to provide the reception services at the existing office and utilise the back office space for other council services.
27. **Option 2** – To provide these same face to face services more locally in other community based buildings and/or by appointment . To maximise the development of other channels of access as summarised in Annex B.
28. **Option 3** – Provide alternative and different channels to accessing those services with face to face services provided in or from the city centre.

Analysis

29. **Option 1** – Customers who currently use the Acomb Office have clearly set out their preference for continuing to access council services face to face in Acomb.
30. The current Acomb Office provides a reception service which is highly valued by local residents and the continued delivery of a face to face reception within the existing Acomb office would continue to meet the needs of the current customer base. However, as can be seen the foot fall is small and in value for money terms, this is an expensive way to provide the service.
31. Given the future plans to relocate the back office staff out of the building into the Eco Depot and West Offices, resulting in 70% of the back office space not being utilised, continuation of the services in the current building will result in the council having office capacity that is over and above its long term requirements.
32. **Option 2** – Locally based council services in Acomb would be delivered by providing regular surgeries for Housing Benefits and Council Tax and Housing Management services in community buildings like the childrens' and community centres and the library. Estate Managers would spend more of their time locally based in the communities they service. This is consistent with the neighbourhood

based approach being developed for Acomb and already in place in other pilot areas.

33. Acomb Explore will continue to provide a general Information / sign posting service and in supporting people to access information online.
34. Given that the majority of the Acomb Office building will be unused following the relocation of staff into existing council buildings in preparation for the move to the new West Offices, this would present the council with the opportunity to terminate the lease on the building and make significant cost savings some of which will be used to reprovide the local customer access arrangements identified above.
35. **Option 3** – The consultation response clearly shows that customer preference is for a locally based service. Only 13% of customers have stated that they would use a face to face service in the city centre.

Corporate Priorities

36. The Council Plan sets out the ambition to ‘Build Strong Communities’ and the approach to neighbourhood working is maturing to underpin the delivery of well co-ordinated services at a local level including the services in this report.
37. In addition under this priority new ways for residents to interact with the council are being developed , including better ways to request services through a 24 hour hotline and self service access via the website.
38. The proposals in this report will help deliver the emerging Customer Strategy (see paragraph 12 above) which is an integral element in developing our ‘Core Capabilities’ in the Council Plan.

Implications

39. The implications arising from the report are:

- (a) **Finance** - Acomb Office, as the report indicates, is predominately used by housing services. Currently, 75% of the annual costs related to the property are therefore recharged to the Housing Revenue Account and only 25% of the costs are charged to the general fund (council tax payer).

This will result in a reduction in the savings that will be made by moving out of Acomb office as only 25% saving would be attributable to the general fund. However, it should be noted that if Housing Services move from Acomb Office as planned and in accordance with the space planning exercise for the new council offices this would substantially increase the costs to the council taxpayer if only general fund services remain.

Acomb Office is currently in the administrative accommodation portfolio project with the assumption that the council would remain in this property. Therefore, it is suggested that the affects of the decisions being made on Acomb Office, are incorporated into the overall administrative accommodation project model, increasing the overall savings of the project.

If **Option 1** is chosen, the council would continue to be liable for the full running costs associated with the office and a 25% charge to the general fund would be £28k per annum. However, if Housing Services did not occupy their current space then the total cost to the general fund of remaining in Acomb Office would be £110k per annum. This would be an additional cost to the general fund per annum of £83k per annum.

If **Option 2** is preferred and the Acomb Office building is no longer needed as part of the council's property portfolio then a dilapidation cost will be incurred and relocation costs of £40k . See Exempt Annex C for details.

25% of the total will be charged to the general fund and will be funded initially from the venture fund reserve.

75% of the total cost will be charged to the HRA and will be funded from the existing HRA budget no longer required for Acomb Office accommodation.

If a community based service was delivered from alternative locations in Acomb, the maximum estimated cost is £15k per annum, which would be funded from the existing general fund budget for the facility at £28k. The balance of the annual savings at £13k per annum would be used to repay the dilapidation / relocation costs with the ongoing saving (once this is paid off) to contribute to the administrative accommodation savings model. This would generate a saving to the model over 25 years including inflation of £389k.

If **Option 3** is chosen, as set out above, the current Acomb Office would be surplus to requirements and 25% savings to the general fund would be £28k per annum. Also associated with Option 3, like in Option 2, are the costs of dilapidation / relocation .

A 25% charge to the general fund will be funded initially from the venture fund reserve. The annual savings of £28k from no longer occupying Acomb office will be used to repay the dilapidation / relocation costs , with the ongoing saving (once this is paid off) to contribute to the administrative accommodation savings model. This would generate a saving to the model over 25 years including inflation of £834k.

A 75% charge of the total dilapidation / relocation cost will be charged to the HRA and will be funded from the existing HRA budget no longer required for Acomb Office accommodation

- (b) **Human Resources (HR)** - Affected staff groups and local union representatives have been informed of the public consultation and possible outcomes. Any changes to the way staff carry out their roles would be subject to full consultation.
- (c) **Equalities** - An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed and planned action to address any known issues or issues arising from the customer survey will be made available on the council's website.
- (d) **Legal** - None except compliance with the Equalities Act.

- (e) **Crime and Disorder** - None
- (f) **Information Technology (IT)** - there is likely to be a need for extra terminals within the Explore centre to deal with an increased number of enquiries.
- (g) **Property** - The current Acomb Office is held by the council on a 10 year Lease from 13 May 2007, however, a clause within the lease gives the council the opportunity to break the lease on 12 May 2012 by giving 6 months notice. If the council were to do so, dilapidations works would be required to be carried out.
- (h) **Other** - There are no other implications.

Risk Management

- 40. **Accessibility** - careful planning of alternatives placed in readily accessible buildings in Acomb will be needed at the same time as maximising the availability of other channels in the public area such as self service terminals and telephone facilities, which should keep risks affecting access at a medium level to be monitored on an ongoing basis.
- 41. **Financial** - costs of relocating the services may be greater than currently envisaged. However, the ratio of savings against potential costs is so great that the risk is considered to be low .
- 42. **Logistical** - that the property can not be handed back to the landlord within the timescale prescribed, thus losing the opportunity to break the Lease. At present, by good project management this risk is again assessed at low.

Recommendations

- 43. Members are asked to:
 - (a) Approve Option 2, to provide customer access to services more locally in a community setting, with a view to ensuring alternative face to face facilities are in place prior to vacating the current Acomb Office.

- (b) Approve the use of the venture fund reserve to fund 25% of the dilapidation / relocation costs attributable to the general fund.
- (c) Approve the use of the existing general fund budget at £28k no longer required at Acomb office to fund community based services to a maximum of £15k.
- (d) Approve the use of the remaining balance on the existing general fund budget, after funding alternative community based services, to repay the venture fund and then contribute to the overall savings of the administrative accommodation project.
- (e) Approve the use of the existing HRA budget no longer required for Acomb Office accommodation to fund the 75% dilapidation / relocation costs.
- (f) That the Director of City Strategy be authorised to serve the lease Break Clause and to negotiate the dilapidations settlement with the Landlord up to the maximum amount listed in the Exempt Annex C.

Reason: To ensure that services continue to be delivered locally to customers and to secure cost savings related costs through the vacation of the back offices.

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Wards Affected: Acomb/All			All √
For further information please contact the author of the report			

Background Papers:

All relevant background papers must be listed here.

Equality Impact Assessment – Access s to Council Services in Acomb
Survey Questions and summary responses Acomb 2011.

Annexes

- Annex A Post Code distribution of visitors to Acomb Office
- Annex B Alternative methods of delivering services
- Annex C Exempt financial information