

Report of the Assistant Director of Customers and Employees

Access to Benefits Services in Acomb

Summary

1. This report follows on from the Cabinet report and decision made in October 2011, on how to continue to provide customers with locally based access to Benefits Services in alternative face to face facilities, after the office at 50 York Road, Acomb was closed to the public at the end of February 2012.
2. As part of our commitment in the council's Customer Strategy 2012-15, 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 service centre at West Offices (due to open in 2013), work has been ongoing to consider how we continue to provide access to Benefits services and information for customers within Acomb.
3. The options and recommendations in this report reflect the opportunities for delivering the Benefits Service efficiently in Acomb and for providing value for money within the context of reduced administration grant which funds the resource and provision of this service, as well as having regard to the wider impacts of the national welfare reform agenda and localisation of council tax support.
4. This report sets out the details of the information and data gathered from mid February 2012 to end of July 2012 on the take-up by customers of Benefits Services at the alternative face to face facilities/locations provided in Acomb.
5. The Cabinet Member is now asked to consider how these services can best be provided in Acomb in order to meet the continuing needs for local residents, as well as provide value for money at a time of reduced funding and increased numbers of benefits claims across the city as a whole.

Background

6. Last year customers and staff were asked to consider options for the access to, and delivery of both the Housing and Benefits services in Acomb. From both customer and staff consultation results, the decision was to provide Benefits Services as follows
:

Monday 9am – 3pm
Gateway Centre,
Front Street YO24 3BN

Wednesday 9am – 12 noon
Foxwood Community Centre,
Cranfield Place YO24 3HY

Thursday 9am – 12 noon
Sanderson Court Community House,
Bramham Road, Chapelfields YO26 5AR

Friday 9am – 1pm
Acomb Explore Library Learning
Centre Front Street YO24 3BN

7. A long term arrangement was not possible with Acomb Explore, as it was refurbished with funding from the Learning and Skills Council with the condition that it is to provide rooms for adult learning. Since it has been opened there has been a full adult learning programme successfully operating. The library space has no capacity for the integration of other permanent services. As a result of the above and existing bookings already made, the Library Service was only able to provide an option for up to two half days per week for up to 4 months, which ended at the end of June. We renegotiated this end date in order to complete our investigations and consultation into producing the recommendations in this report. There is now an 8.30 to 5.00 pm telephone service available direct to benefit assessors available to members of the public using Acomb Explore.
8. Arising from Health and Safety inspections and staff concerns, we have needed to provide 2 benefits staff at each venue on each day.
9. There is a resource and financial transaction cost of approximately £494 per week incurred by offering face to face access to the Benefits Service at these 4 venues. There is also an adverse impact on assessment activity and productivity within the central Benefits team in York due to the current need to provide 2 Benefits staff at each venue.

10. Customers across the city can currently access the Benefits Service and information in a range of ways:

Online at <http://www.york.gov.uk/advice/Benefits/>

By email to benefits@york.gov.uk

By phone to the direct, dedicated phone line – 01904 551556 – Monday to Friday 830am to 5pm

In person at Library Square – Monday to Friday 830am to 5pm.

11. Using business data alongside Mosaic/Experian data, we are also able to identify areas where there is potentially low take up of housing and/or council tax benefit. This will inform how we target provision of access to Benefits Services and information now and in future across the city, as well as how we can target activities to these identified areas of low take up to make best use of our resources and ensure we reach vulnerable individuals and groups across all areas.

Data capture and findings for Acomb venues

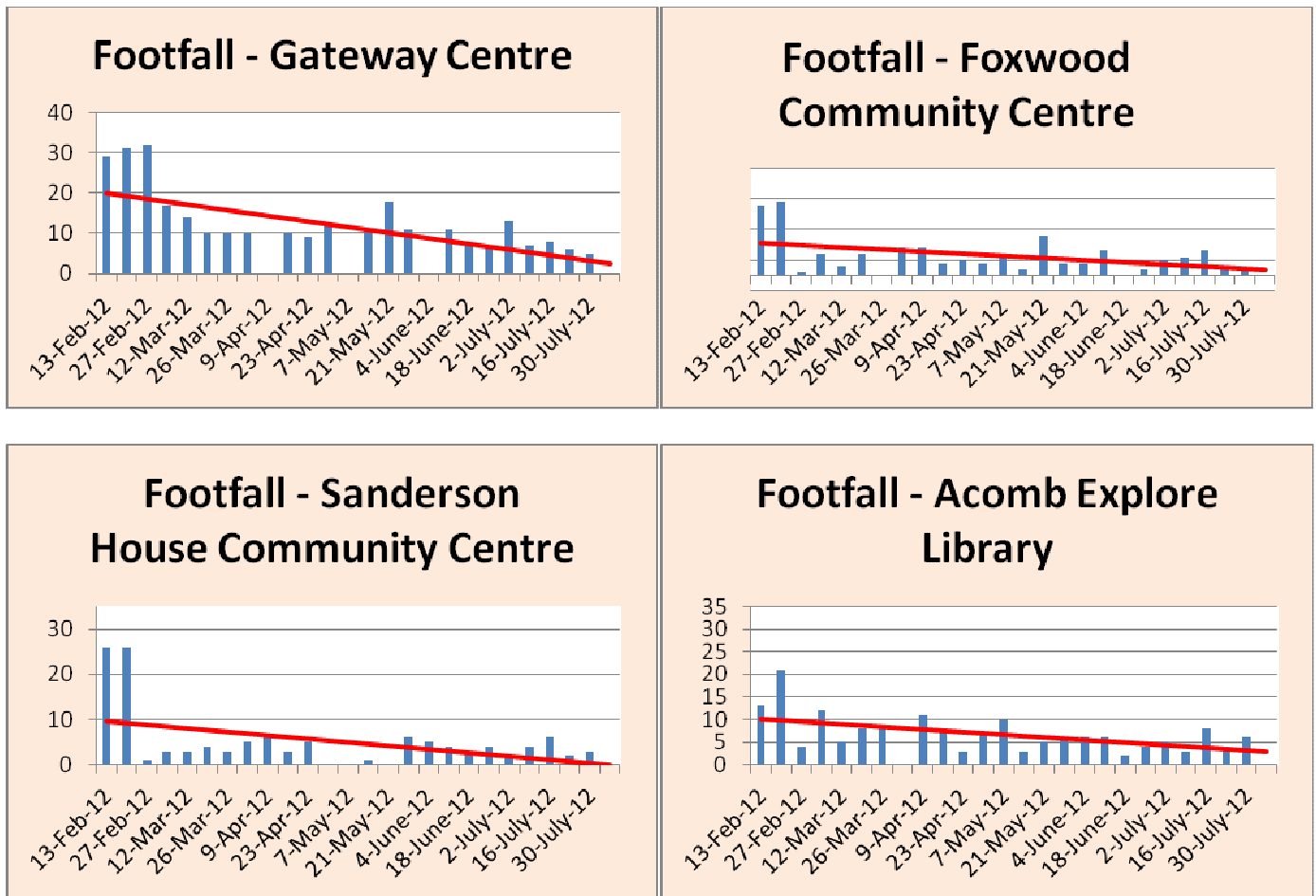
12. We have carried out an analysis of customer footfall, transaction and enquiry type data captured for 3 months at all 4 venues in Acomb.

The table below shows the 4 venues customer footfall by date.

	Gateway Centre	Foxwood Community Centre	Sanderson House Community Centre	Acomb Explore Library	Total
5-Mar-12	17	7	3	12	39
12-Mar-12	14	3	3	5	21
19-Mar-12	10	7	4	8	29
26-Mar-12	10	0	3	8	21
2-Apr-12	10	9	5	0	24
9-Apr-12	0	9	7	11	27
16-Apr-12	10	4	3	8	25
23-Apr-12	9	5	5	3	22
30-Apr-12	12	4	0	7	23
7-May-12	0	6	0	10	16
14-May-12	11	2	1	3	17
21-May-12	18	13	0	5	36
28-May-12	11	4	6	6	27
4-June-12	0	4	5	6	15
11-June-12	11	8	4	6	29
18-June-12	7	0	3	2	12
25-June-12	7	2	4	4	17
2-July-12	13	5	2	5	25
9-July-12	7	6	4	3	20

	Gateway Centre	Foxwood Community Centre	Sanderson House Community Centre	Acomb Explore Library	Total
16-July-12	8	8	6	8	30
23-July-12	6	2	2	4	14
30-July-12	5	2	3	6	16

The following graphs for each of the 4 venues show the customer footfall by date as well as the downward trend in the numbers of customers visiting the face to face Benefits Service at each of the venues.

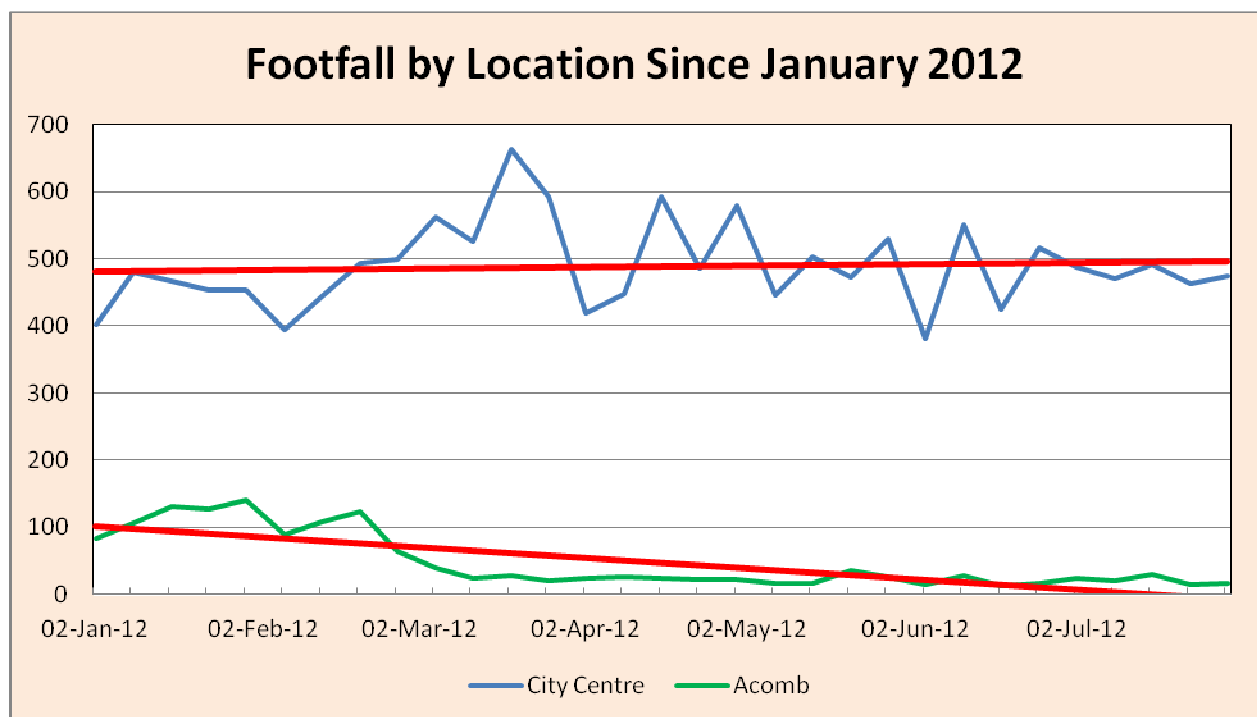


Comparing the highest 3 incidences of customer footfall at each of the venues against the lowest 3, there is the following reductions in customer footfall:

- Gateway Centre shows highest average footfall of 16 and lowest average of 2, indicating a reduction of 87.5% in customers accessing the Benefits Service at this venue.
- Foxwood shows highest average footfall of 11 and lowest average of 1, indicating a reduction of 90.9% in customers accessing the Benefits Service at this venue.

- Sanderson shows highest average footfall of 7 and lowest average of 1, indicating a reduction of 85.7% in customers accessing the Benefits Service at this venue.
- Acomb Explore shows highest average footfall of 11 and lowest average of 2, indicating a reduction of 81.8% in customers accessing the Benefits Service at this venue.

13. We also looked at any impact the changes in face to face access in Acomb had on the city centre location at Library Square. The results indicated a slight rise in numbers of customers accessing Benefits Service at Library Square however this may also be due to the time of year, as from February to April, the Benefits Service conducts annual uprating of benefit awards and claims.



14. The data captured suggests that customers are prepared to 'channel shift' using other means of contacting the council. This is indicated by the increase in customer footfall at city centre venue not being equal to the reduced number of customers accessing the face to face Benefits Service at the 4 venues. This is encouraging, as it suggests that customers are prepared to contact the Benefits Service using our other contact channels.

15. The full data capture results from all Acomb venues are shown at Annex 1.

Consultation

16. In addition to the use of customer footfall data, benefits staff have been consulted from December 2011 on the options for providing access to benefits service in Acomb. Ongoing updates and briefing have been provided either through dedicated events or through team meetings.

17. Dedicated workshops with Benefits staff were completed in August 2012 to further engage with staff to gather their feedback and insight on access to Benefits Services in Acomb. Using “Lean” techniques, we explored staff experiences across “people, processes, performance and systems”. Their insight reinforced the data capture findings of the continued trend of footfall falling at all Acomb venues. They also supported the need to continue to provide access to Benefits Services and information by offering phone access at the venues.

Options/Analysis:

18. Option 1 – Keep as current provision

Continuing to provide the current provision of face to face access to Benefits Service at the 4 venues is not a viable, cost effective option due to the continuing fall in customers accessing the services at all 4 venues and the resulting impact on processing and assessment of benefit claims by 2 staff providing the service at each of the venues. Also, we cannot continue to use the space in Acomb Explore any longer.

19. Option 2 – Reduce number of face to face access to Benefits Service venues to one with extended face to face hours at one and give Acomb residents full day access to benefits staff over the telephone at 3 other locations.

20. This option would consist of the following elements with supporting analysis:

- Continue to provide face to face access to Benefits Service at Gateway Centre on a Monday with extended hours, to become effective during December 2012. This will enable us to continue to provide face to face access to Benefits Service at Gateway Centre on a Monday. From the data capture analysis there is the highest take up of accessing Benefits Services face to face at this venue on a Monday.
- Withdraw face to face access from Foxwood and Sanderson Community Centres on a Wednesday and Thursday and seek approval for provision of dedicated direct phone contact access at these community venues. The data analysis shows a very low take up of face to face access to Benefits Services at these venues. We have already installed phone line ports for internal phone usage which can be used by customers to contact the Benefits Service phone team direct. Dependent on the venue opening hours and with the Residents Committees agreement, this could potentially open up access via the phone, during our existing opening hours of 8:30am to 5pm Monday to Friday at these venues.
- Dedicated direct phone contact access at Acomb Explore to the Benefits Service phone team. The deadline for us to vacate the room provision at Acomb Explore has been reached and the data analysis shows a low take up of face to face Benefits Services at Acomb Explore as well as a continuing downward trend in customer footfall. The existing phone line ports have already been reopened at this

venue and so can be used by customers now to contact the Benefits Service phone team direct from this venue during our existing opening hours of 8:30am to 5pm Monday to Friday.

- There may be other venues that will better meet customer requirements for face to face access to Benefits Service in Acomb and we will keep this under review using customer insight data.

Council Plan

21. This links to the Build Strong Communities and Protect Vulnerable People Priorities and will support delivery of key actions in the core competencies of “a confident collaborative organisation” and “completely in touch with our communities”.

Implications

Financial

22. Option 2 will save £60 per week in room hire at Acomb Explore, other premises costs (£43.50 per week) for Foxwood and Sanderson are subject to further discussions with Housing Services which pays 50% of the costs of premises and will provide the signposting service for Housing & Council Tax Benefits if/when the service moves out of the two locations . If we move out of any of the current venues, the hardwire data connection ports and phone ports may still be utilised by the community venue. The remaining staffing resources and costs will be redirected to the city centre service.

Human Resources (HR)

23. Staff have been fully consulted on the implications of this report and are in support of the changes.

Equalities

24. A single Communities Impact Assessment has been undertaken and completed by the Benefits Service area. There is an improvement action plan in place which is monitored by Customer & Business Support Services Management Team and the Directorate’s Fairness Network Group.

The model for ongoing access to the Benefits Service and information across all areas of the City will be reviewed in light of City of York Council’s Financial Inclusion Strategy.

Legal

25. There are no legal implications.

Crime and Disorder

26. There are no crime and disorder implications.

Information Technology (IT)

27. There are no further implications for IT aside from those outlined in the report around telephone installation.

Property

28. At both Foxwood and Sanderson House community centres, we will seek approval from their respective committees, to provide a change in service at their venues.

Other

29. None

Risk Management

30. There is a risk that resources continue to be diverted to an area where there is reducing demand for service at the cost of the service provided to the majority of residents in York. A redesigned service for Acomb not only will provide a wider range of ways for Acomb residents to access the service of longer opening hours, but could provide a model for other areas of York when work to deliver the Financial Inclusion strategy commences.

Recommendation

31. The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services is asked to agree Option 2 to give Acomb residents wider access to the Benefits Service and information during full council opening hours in a cost-effective way at 3 out of the 4 venues whilst improving the face to face offer at the venue that is currently most used.

Reason: *The continuing fall in customers accessing the services at all 4 venues, and the resulting impact on processing and assessment of benefit claims in the wider York team which is already under pressure from reduced funding and increased workloads. This is in addition to the space in Acomb Explore becoming unavailable for this use.*

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**Report
Approved**



Date *9th November 2012*

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Background Papers:

All relevant background papers must be listed here.

Access to Customer Reception Services in Acomb (October 4 2011)

Annexes

None