

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: **C-083-2013/14**

Date of meeting: **3 March 2014**



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: **Support Services**

Subject: **Christmas/New Year Arrangements**

Responsible Officer: **Paula Maginnis** **(01992 564536).**

Democratic Services Officer: **Gary Woodhall** **(01992 564470).**

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

(1) Cabinet decides on the following options for future arrangements over the Christmas/New Year period:

- (a) That the Civic Offices Building remains open;**
- (b) That the the continuation of the arrangements and the proposed 5 year schedule be agreed; or**
- (c) That the arrangements for 2014/15, as set out in the proposed 5 year schedule be agreed; and**

(2) That if recommendation 1 (c) is agreed, the Christmas/New Year arrangements be considered by the Joint Consultative Committee on an annual basis, following consultation with residents and Members.

Executive Summary:

The current arrangements for the closure of the Civic Offices building ended Christmas/New Year 2013/2014. Consultation has taken place with staff and Management Board; both strongly support the continuation of the arrangements. Management Board also supports the continuation of the arrangements for the next five years.

There are a range of services that the public can access during this period, for both emergencies and normal day-to-day service delivery.

Due to the improvements to the Civic Offices regarding lighting and heating over the previous 2-3 years the savings to the Council during the closure are no longer a decisive factor.

The number of telephone calls to the main switchboard number, reduced by 65% during the 'Christmas' week and by 44% during the 'New Year' week, compared with 'normal' levels.

Across Essex there is a mixture of Councils who open or close during this period. The majority of Council's make decisions on an annual basis regarding their arrangements for this period.

A report regarding future arrangements was submitted to the January 2014 meeting of the

Joint Consultative Committee. The recommendations were not agreed. In addition a formal proposal was put to the Committee at the meeting which was also not agreed.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

To enable Cabinet to discuss and agree the arrangements for future Christmas/New Year periods.

Other Options for Action:

The Cabinet can substitute other arrangements to the closure arrangements and/or the length of schedule.

Report:

1. In June 2002 the Council received a proposal from Unison requesting that staff took their 2 statutory days on the 30 and 31 of December 2002, resulting in the Civic Office closure from noon on 24 December 2002 until 2 January 2003. (Members had previously agreed that the 27 December 2002 would be a special leave day enabling the closure).

2. At this time staff was consulted on the proposal and were also asked if they would agree to use their statutory days for the next 5 years to allow future closures. Staff overwhelmingly agreed with the proposals and after member agreement the arrangements were put in place. This earlier agreement ended Christmas/New Year 2007/2008.

3. The results of the Employee Survey 2006 showed that 75% of staff who responded to the employee survey indicated that the use of special leave days and the 2 statutory days was the most valued benefit offered by the Council. As a result of this response Management Board agreed that a proposal to extend the current arrangements for a further period be submitted to members. An extension to the arrangements was agreed by Cabinet in November 2007 which ended Christmas/New Year 2012/2013.

4. Members agreed a further 1 year extension to the arrangements for the Christmas/New Period 2013/14.

5. The Joint Consultative Committee requested a report which was considered at their January 2014 meeting. The report recommended that the Committee:

(1) Recommend the continuation of the current Christmas/New Year arrangements; and

(2) Subject to recommendation (1), agree the arrangements for the next 5 years.

The Committee voted on these recommendations, resulting in a 7 (staff) – 7 (member) division.

6. Member representatives made the following formal proposal:

(i) That the Christmas/New Year arrangements as stated on the schedule for 2014/15 be agreed;

(ii) That the Christmas/New Year arrangements are considered by the Joint Consultative Committee on an annual basis;

(iii) Consultation is carried out with residents; and

- (iv) Consultation is carried out with members.

The Committee voted on these recommendations, resulting in a 7 (member) – 7 (staff) division.

Employee Consultation – Employee Survey February 2013

7. As stated, the current arrangements came to an end after 2013/14 and staff were consulted on the closure through the Employee Survey in 2013. The following questions were asked in the Survey;

- Do you wish the arrangements for a Christmas/New Year closure to continue?
- Would you agree to use annual leave to facilitate the closure?
- Are you aware of any adverse comments made by the public relating to the current closure arrangements?
- If Yes, give details.
- Are there current arrangements in place to deal with public enquiries and emergencies during this period?
- Please detail other ways to cover frontline services without the need to open the main offices.

8. In summary 94% of staff who responded to the survey wished the current arrangements to continue, regardless of faith. Staff were asked if they would agree to use their annual leave (in addition to using their Statutory Days) to facilitate the closure, 43% said they would 55% said they would not.

9. Only 5% of respondents were aware of the public making adverse comments regarding the closure and 64% of respondents stated that they were aware of arrangements for the public over this period.

10. Most respondents suggested that emergency/call out arrangements, use of the Council's website and the use of remote/home working arrangements were ways to cover frontline services during this period, rather than opening the Civic Offices.

11. The majority of respondents across all faiths wished the arrangements to continue.

Management Board Consultation

12. At its meeting on 11 December 2013, Management Board reviewed and discussed the current Civic Offices closure over the Christmas and New Year period. It supported the continuation of the current arrangements on the basis of the following:

- (i) a very strong support expressed in the staff survey;
- (ii) new arrangements with Mears for out of hours cover would allow the Council to continue to be even more contactable;
- (iii) electronic services operated by the Council would be available, including on-line payments;
- (iv) goodwill from staff would be maintained. Staff have shown enormous goodwill when faced with exceptional circumstances, e.g. during 2013 when the Civic Offices suffered water damage to the building including the electrics, clearing staff car parks of snow to enable the building to open, assisting other authorities in emergency

situations (i.e. Tendring's emergency centres during the flooding). In addition, staff will be required to work in new teams and adopt new ways of working as a result of the restructure, the implementation of smarter working and doing more with less;

(v) many private and public organisations are closed over the Christmas/New Year period;

(vi) cover arrangements for monitoring social media enquiries and for updating the website remotely are being introduced; and

(vii) the preference for staff to attend work at peak/busy times, rather when it is less busy.

13. Furthermore, Management Board recognised that as the Council adopts flexible working practices and maximises the use of technology (both for staff and the public), access to Council services will evolve over the coming years.

14. Management Board supported the continuation of the current arrangements for the next 5 years. A copy of the proposed schedule is attached at Appendix 1.

Joint Consultative Committee – Member Representatives

15. Member Representatives of the Joint Consultative Committee at their January 2014 meeting noted that the current Christmas/New Year arrangements were popular with staff. However, the Council is providing services to the public. They also commented that the 5 year schedule was not practical, the period was too long, as the Council's working arrangements were likely to change during this period.

16. Member Representatives recommended a counter proposal which is set out in paragraph 6 of this report.

17. Any further comments of the Committee's Member Representatives will be provided verbally at the meeting.

Joint Consultative Committee – Staff Representatives

18. The Staff Representatives of the Joint Consultative Committee would ask that the Cabinet give consideration to the following comments in support of the Management item in respect of the Council's Christmas and New Year working arrangements.

19. The Council adopted the idea of limiting the services available to the public between Christmas and the New Year over 10 years ago. We use the term 'limiting' because it is important to remember that the Council is not completely closed during this period. In addition to the list of services provided (paragraphs 24 to 30 of the management report) it should be noted that there are many other services available 24/7, i.e. the Council website gives access to an abundance of information and forms including planning, building control and housing benefit application forms, business rates, council tax and housing vacation and registration forms, direct debits, etc.

20. In addition, there are several ways that the public can pay for services, other than through the Council's Cashier service, i.e. using 'Pay Point' for rents, which is located in many shops, paying for business rates, council tax, rent and planning applications via the Council website, as well as the dedicated telephone payment line. There is also a payment kiosk situated in the library at Waltham Abbey, which is available during their opening times.

21. There is no doubting the opinion of staff in support of the Christmas to New Year working arrangements, which are borne out by the results of the 2006 staff survey and the more recent emphatic results of the 2013 survey. However, in addition, we would ask the Cabinet to consider the following points:

- Staff have become accustomed to the extended break over the Christmas period and feel the benefit of being able to 're-charge their batteries', following the stressful build-up of the holiday season, in particular for those in public facing jobs. This has a significant impact on staff well-being and work-life balance.
- It gives the opportunity for staff to visit extended family members, whether residing within the UK or abroad, which helps to lift morale and sustain family values.
- Staff have suffered financially over recent years, having benefited from a mere 1% pay rise since 2009, during which time their salary has been eroded by almost 15% as a result of inflation. This has had a significant detrimental effect on staff morale.
- For the Council to ignore the overwhelming strength of feeling from the staff, in support of the Christmas to New Year closure, could seriously damage staff-management relations and have a detrimental effect on staff morale.

22. Aside from the obvious benefits to staff, it should not go un-noted that there are significant gains to be had by the Council resulting from the Christmas to New Year closure. Aside from those listed in the management report, we would ask the Cabinet to consider the following points:

(i) Staff are required to sacrifice two days annual leave, fixed during the Christmas closure period, which they would likely otherwise take during a far busier work period.

(ii) The majority of staff are anxious and concerned about their future, particularly the next couple of years whilst the Council goes through the transition of directorates and services. This will no doubt be more successful and easier for all parties concerned with a well-motivated workforce.

(iii) Well motivated, happy workers are less likely to seek alternative employment, which is a concern bearing in mind the job market is constantly improving. The erosion of staff conditions, as well as pay could quickly make retention and recruitment a problem for the council.

(iv) Human Resources and the trade unions have worked in recent years, at the behest of the Joint Consultative Committee, in producing and promoting the benefits of staff surveys. To which end the last one was completed by 58% of staff, which whilst being a significant percentage was nonetheless still less than ideal. However, the one outstanding result of any recent staff survey has been the 94% of those completing the survey expressing their wish that the existing Christmas to New Year closure arrangements continue. In choosing whether to acknowledge such a strong view from the staff will no doubt have a profound effect on the result of future surveys, which should be something that the Council can capitalize on.

23. Finally, it is worthwhile remembering that the staff are not asking for anything extra, but merely requesting that the arrangements put in place in 2002 by the council be allowed to continue. Furthermore, it should be noted that many Council services are now far more accessible compared to back then due to the advances in technology.

Services Provided over this Period

- Environmental Services

24. The Waste Management Officers are available during this time as are the Noise Enforcement Officers (call out service between 1pm – 12am). North Weald Airfield is open on the non-bank holidays and weekends.

- Legal Services

25. If the Courts are open during this period either a Barrister's Chambers or a Council Legal Officer will be on standby should there be a warrant executed and a hearing during this period. If the Courts are closed the need does not arise.

- Community Services

26. Call-out arrangements are in place for the Museum and the Limes Centre in respect of an alarm call.

- Planning

27. The Building Control team are available over this period for dangerous structures (statutory requirement). A range of information and forms regarding Planning applications and issues are available on the website for the public to access.

- Housing

28. Call-out arrangements are currently in place for the Housing Repairs and Homeless teams (including Norway House) and the Careline service is available 365 days of the year. The Scheme Manager Service also undertakes at least one visit to sheltered scheme residents over this period. Arrangements are in place to deal with emergencies arising from Housing contracts, including the contractors themselves.

29. From April 2014 new arrangements with Mears will provide out of hours cover for all Council services.

- Standby Officers

30. Currently, the Standby Officers are on duty over the Christmas/New Year period and assist the public who ring the Council on the main switchboard number. This service will be transferred to Mears from 1 April 2014 who will continue to handle all the calls to the Council over this period from their call centre.

- Cashiers

31. The public can continue to make payments on line during this period.

- Communications

32. Changes to the Website and telephone systems will make it easier for officers to respond to circumstances as they arise, as messages can be changed without visiting the Civic Offices.

Savings on Heating and Lighting for Seven days

33. Over the Christmas/New Year period 2012/2013 the savings of closing the Civic Offices was £1727. This low amount reflects the improvements to the Civic Offices regarding lighting and heating efficiencies of the building. (The dates covered were 24 – 28 December 2012, 31 December 2012 and 1 January 2013). (Information for 2013/14 is not available).

Number of Calls to Main Number

34. The table below sets out the number of calls to the main switchboard number. The majority of calls answered by the Standby Officers, during this period were for housing repairs issues.

Date	Total Call Volume
1-Dec-13 to 5-Dec-13	3553
23-Dec-13 to 27-Dec-13	1232
31-Dec-13 to 2-Jan-14	1554

Table 1

Date	Out of Hours calls
25-Dec-13 to 1-Jan-14	506

Table 2

35. The figures include repeat calls as Standby Officers can only take one call at a time but all the calls are logged by the system.

36. Table 1 shows that the volume of calls to the Council's main number reduces by approximately 65% during the Christmas week and by 44% during the New Year week.

37. Management Board acknowledged the decrease in the number of calls and visitors to the Civic Offices during this period. For practical reasons they would wish their staff to attend work when the public wish to contact the Council rather than during this period where contact is significantly reduced.

38. From 2014/15 this service will be undertaken by Mears.

What Other Essex Authorities Do

39. Essex authorities were requested to provide information regarding their arrangements for 2013/14 which are set out below. The majority of authorities decide their arrangements on an annual basis.

Authority	Arrangements for 2013/14
Braintree	Closed for the official bank holidays and the 27th
Brentwood	Closed for the official bank holidays and the 27th
Castle Point	Same arrangements as Epping. Decided on an annual basis
Chelmsford	Same arrangements as Epping. Decided on an annual basis
Colchester	Closed on Christmas Eve and 27 th December. Open from 30 th December, statutory days are used to facilitate the close.
Essex County Council	Closed for the official bank holidays and the 27th
Harlow	Same arrangements as Epping. Have a 5 year schedule in place from 2013. The Civic Offices are closed during this period.
Havering	Closed for bank holidays and using statutory day for Friday 27 December
Maldon	Only closed for the official bank holidays.
Rochford	Closed for the official bank holidays and the 27th
Tendring	Only closed for the official bank holidays
Thurrock	Closed for the official bank holidays and the 27th
Uttlesford	Closed for the official bank holidays and the 27th

Sickness Absence

40. Over the last 10 years, sickness absence in the UK is on average 27% higher during October to March than in April to September. (Office of National Statistics). At the Council over recent years there is only a 13% difference.

41. There is approximately a 30% reduction of new sickness absence cases in Q4 compared to Q3. Many cases in Q4 are due to long term absence first recorded in Q3.

42. There are likely to be several factors for this reduction and one factor could be the break staff receive over the Christmas/New Year period.

Resource Implications:

There are no resource implications to the Council.

Legal and Governance Implications:

There are no legal or governance implications.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

There are no safer, cleaner and greener implications.

Consultation Undertaken:

Employees were consulted through the Employee Survey 2013. The results were reported to the Joint Consultative Committee on the 25 July 2013 and 23 January 2014.

Background Papers:

Joint Consultative Committee of 23 January 2014.

Impact Assessments:**Risk Management**

The Council is not closed during this period, the public can still access a range of services, emergency or otherwise.