

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-042-2014/15
Date of meeting: 1 December 2014



Portfolio: Technology & Support Services
Subject: Christmas/New Year Civic Office Closure
Responsible Officer: Paula Maginnis (01992 564536).
Democratic Services: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) To consider the results of the public and member consultation exercises; and**
- (2) With regard to the exercises above, the Joint Consultative Committee recommends to Cabinet:**
 - (a) the continuation of the current Christmas/New Year arrangements; and**
 - (b) agree the arrangements for the next 3 years from 2015/16 to 2017/18.**

Executive Summary:

Consultation has taken place with staff and Management Board about access to services over the Christmas/New Year period. Both staff and Management Board were of the view that because of the lower demand for services over this period, the most efficient way to meet this demand is by signposting services rather than opening the whole office. All essential services are covered either by the out-of-hours contact centre or specific staff on call over the period.

Management Board also supported the continuation of the arrangements for the next five years. The Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) and Cabinet were not in favour of a five year arrangement and therefore the recommendation reflects a lesser period of time.

The detailed results of the staff and Management Board consultation were reported to the JCC in January 2014. The JCC also noted that there are a range of Council services that can be accessed by the public during this period, for both emergencies and normal day-to-day service delivery.

Subsequent to this JCC report Cabinet, in March, agreed to the closure of the Civic Offices for 2014/15. Also, that any closure arrangements for future years were to be considered by JCC before 1 November 2014 following consultation with residents and members. This further consultation exercise is now complete and full details of the responses can be found in appendices 1 and 2.

In summary 209 residents responded to the consultation and;

- 99% of these stated they had not been inconvenienced by the Civic Office closure
- 82% said they were aware of available services over the Christmas period

- 46% of respondents tended to use the Council's website to find out about services
- 45% would use the website to find out information about services over the Christmas period

Only three members responded to their consultation survey. One member indicated that they had received a complaint regarding the Civic Office closure (the comments did not indicate whether this was a recent or older complaint). All respondents were aware of available services during this period and 1 had been inconvenienced (again the comments did not indicate whether this was a recent issue).

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

The results of the public consultation show that 99% of respondents said that they had not been inconvenienced by not being able to access a Council service between 24 December and 2 January.

To recognise the strong support of staff regarding the arrangements for the Christmas/New Year Period.

Other Options for Action:

Cabinet could substitute other arrangements.

Cabinet could decide not to continue with the current arrangements.

Report:

1. Cabinet is aware of when and how the Christmas/New Year arrangements were originally agreed and that staff use their own leave i.e. 2 statutory days to facilitate the closure.

2. It has previously been reported to Cabinet that 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, (which enable a closure of the offices between Christmas and New Year) was the most valued benefit. As a result of this consultation the arrangements were extended to Christmas/New Year 2012/2013.

3. Members agreed a further 1 year extension to the arrangements for the Christmas/New Period 2013/14, and further consultation took place in February 2013. In summary 94% of staff who responded to this consultation wished the current arrangements to continue, regardless of faith. Staff were asked if they would agree to use further annual leave (in addition to Statutory Days) to facilitate the closure, 43% said they would 55% said they would not.

(a) Management Board were also consulted in December 2013 who agreed that the closure arrangements be supported on the following basis;

(b) Very strong support expressed in the staff survey;

(c) New arrangements with Mears for out of hours cover would allow the Council to continue to be contactable;

(d) Electronic services operated by the Council would be available, including on-line payments;

(e) Goodwill from staff to change would be maintained. In addition, 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);

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

(g) Cover arrangements for monitoring social media enquiries and for updating the website remotely are being introduced.

4. 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.

5. Cabinet are aware that there are a number of services available to the public during this period and the Mears Contact Centre is taking the out-of-hours calls on behalf of the Council, both for housing repairs calls and general calls to the switchboard number.

Consultation Exercises

6. Cabinet requested that a consultation exercise was undertaken to obtain the views of both the residents of the District and members. Both consultation exercises were carried out between 28 June and 17 August 2014.

Public Consultation

7. In summary 209 residents responded to the public consultation exercise:

- 99% of these stated they had not been inconvenienced by the Civic Office closure;
- 82% said they were aware of available services over the Christmas period;
- 46% of respondents tended to use the Council's website to find out about services; and
- 45% would use the website to find out information about services over the Christmas period.

8. A third of respondents thought they may require environmental services including roads/ street lighting etc. during this period which are managed by the County Council and a third may require waste and recycling services which are managed by the Council (see question 10). When asked what other services should be available, critical services and homelessness were mentioned, however the majority response to this question was none.

Member Consultation

9. In summary only 3 members responded to the consultation. All of the respondents were aware of the services that can be accessed during this period. One member indicated that they had received a complaint regarding the Civic Office closure (the comments did not indicate whether this was a recent or older complaint) and 1 had been inconvenienced by not being able to access a service during this period (again the comments did not indicate whether this was a recent issue).

10. Members were sympathetic to office closure for this period. However, they wished to know what the public thought.

11. Detailed responses to the consultation can be found at Appendices 1 and 2.

Resource Implications:

There are no resource implications to the Council.

Legal and Governance Implications:

None.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

N/A.

Consultation Undertaken:

Consultation has been undertaken with staff, Management Board, residents and members. The detailed consultation responses received from residents and members are attached to the report.

Background Papers:

None.

Risk Management:

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

Due Regard Record:

This page shows **which groups of people are affected** by the subject of this report. It sets out **how they are affected** and how any **unlawful discrimination** they experience can be eliminated. It also includes information about how **access to the service(s)** subject to this report can be improved for the different groups of people; and how they can be assisted to **understand each other better** as a result of the subject of this report.

S149 Equality Act 2010 requires that due regard must be paid to this information when considering the subject of this report.

The Council has closed the Civic Offices over the Christmas/New Year period since 2002.

Staff and members have been consulted at various times since 2002, with both parties agreeing to continue the arrangements up to this point.

During February 2013 staff were consulted on the arrangements via the Employee Survey which 58% of Council staff responded.

The following is a breakdown of Employee Survey respondents who wished the arrangements to continue;

- 91% of male respondents
- 96% of female respondents
- 94.5% of Christian respondents
- 100% of Hindu respondents
- 100% of Jewish respondents
- 80% of Muslim respondents
- 95% of atheists
- 100% of Sikh respondents

This shows that the benefit is uniformly supported by staff regardless of gender or race.

Overall, 94% of respondents wished to see the arrangements to continue.

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. It should be noted that 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.

The following is a breakdown of the Public Survey respondents;

52% were female	10% 20 – 25 years old
38% were male	19% 36 – 45
50% were Christian	12% disabled
2% were Hindu	83% not disabled
3% were Jewish	
1% were Muslim	
26% stated no faith	

The Survey showed that religious belief was not a factor in whether or not respondents felt

inconvenienced by the Civic Office closure during the Christmas/New Year period. Two of those who indicated they had a disability (from 29 respondents) said that they had been inconvenienced by the closure of the Civic Offices.

The Council is not closed during this period and a number of services are providing a normal service in particular, the Careline service. Scheme Managers also make visits over this period. In addition, the Waste Management Officers provide a regular service on the non-Bank Holidays.

Out-of-hours calls to the main switchboard number are answered by Mears, with the majority of calls being for housing repairs. Arrangements are in place to call out Council staff and/or contractors to deal with issues if required.