

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-007-2018/19
Date of meeting: 6 September 2018



Portfolio: Technology and Support
Subject: Christmas/New Year Closure of Council Offices
Responsible Officer: Paula Maginnis (01992 564536).
Democratic Services: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

To agree the Joint Consultative Committee's recommendation to continue the current Christmas/New Year arrangements for 2018 – 2020, in accordance with the Schedule at appendix 1.

Executive Summary:

For the past 16 years the Council has closed a number of Council offices throughout the Christmas and New Year period. The closure is facilitated by fixing the 2 statutory days, account for the bank holidays and, where necessary, the Council giving an additional day(s). The current schedule was agreed by Cabinet in December 2014, which came to an end in 2017/2018.

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 continuing lower demand for services over this period, the most efficient way to meet this demand is by signposting the public to services rather than opening the Council offices. 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 2 years.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

Consultation with staff showed that 97% of respondents wished the arrangements for the closure of Council offices over the Christmas/New Year period continued.

The report recognises the strong support of staff and Management Board regarding the current arrangements for the Christmas/New Year Period.

Other Options for Action:

The Committee could substitute other arrangements.

The Committee could decide not to continue with the current arrangements.

Report:

Background

1. Since 2002 the Council has closed the Civic and other offices over the Christmas and New Year period. The current arrangements make use of the 2 statutory days, bank holidays and, when necessary, 'special leave' days to facilitate the closure.

2. Employees are entitled to 2 statutory days each year which with the agreement of both the Council and staff have been fixed at Christmas/New Year to facilitate the closure of offices (as opposed to having it their leave to take at any time). Members agreed that additional a 'special leave day' (s) would be given to enable the closures.
3. Management Board agree that the closure arrangements should be supported and continued on the following basis;
 - (a) Very strong support expressed in the staff survey (see below) and the positive effect on staff morale (and notes that there has been an increase in the number of respondents and the amount of support for the arrangements);
 - (b) Arrangements with Mears for out of hours cover allow the Council to continue to be contactable over a range of frontline services;
 - (c) Experience has demonstrated that effective on-call arrangements are able to be put in place over the Christmas period
 - (d) Electronic services operated by the Council are available, including on-line payments, reporting issues and information;
 - (e) Staff are currently dealing with a significant amount of change and the wish is that staff continue to be engaged with this, maintaining the momentum.
 - (f) Many private and public organisations the Council deal with are closed over the Christmas/New Year period;
 - (g) Cover arrangements for monitoring social media enquiries and for updating the website remotely have been working successfully for a number of years.
 - (h) It is preferable to have staff absent at this much less busy time of the year, than at other times when greater public contact is required
 - (i) There are staff wellbeing benefits of ensuring that staff have an uninterrupted Christmas break
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 continue to evolve over the coming years.
5. The Committee 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 routine housing repairs calls and general emergency calls to the switchboard number.
6. The proposed schedule is attached at Appendix 1.

Consultation

7. Consultation took place with staff in 2003, 2006, 2013 and a further Survey has just been completed (in 2018). In 2013, 395 employees responded to the survey and 94% wished the arrangements to continue. In 2018, 525 employees responded and 97% would like the arrangements to continue – representing an increased response rate and an even greater level of support. The results of the 2018 consultation are attached at Appendix 2.
8. Only 1% of staff (5 comments) reported in the recent survey that they had received an adverse comment from the public. Two of these respondents did not wish the arrangements to continue.
9. Of the respondents to the public consultation in 2014, 99.8% said they had not been inconvenienced by not being able to access a Council service during this period.
10. Members highlighted a range of services that should be contactable during this period as follows;

- Housing Repairs
- Housing Options
- Waste, recycling and other environmental services
- Benefits/Council Tax/Rent

It is worth noting that the Council's website and telephone messages signpost the public to report environmental issues on-line and to call Mears for routine housing repairs and for all emergencies. The website can be used by the public for on-line reporting, payments and information for Council Tax and Benefits.

Resource Implications:

There are no additional 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 and Management Board. Previously consultation has been carried out with residents and members

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. Scheme Managers make visits to residents over this period, North Weald Airfield is open on the non-Bank Holidays. 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.

Equality Impact Assessment

Is this a new policy (or decision) or a change to an existing policy, practice or project?	Extension of an existing practice that has been in place since 2002
Describe the main aims, objectives and purpose of the policy (or decision)	Closure of the majority of the Council's offices over the Christmas/New Year period. Using a range of other methods to signpost the public to the right place and increasing the availability of online reporting, payments and information.
What outcome(s) are you hoping to achieve (ie decommissioning or commissioning a service)?	Extending the current arrangements
Does or will the policy or decision affect: service users employees the wider community or groups of people, particularly where there are areas of known inequalities?	Employees. The facilitation of office closures of the Christmas/New Year period.
Will the policy or decision influence how organisations operate?	It may have an impact on partner organisations and service providers. However, staff ensure that information is provided in advance of the Council office closures.
Will the policy or decision involve substantial changes in resources?	No
Is this policy or decision associated with any of the Council's other policies and how, if applicable, does the proposed policy support corporate outcomes?	No
What does the information tell you about those groups identified?	An employee survey was recently completed (June 2018) and the results are set out in Appendix 2 of the report.
Have you consulted or involved those groups that are likely to be affected by the policy or decision you want to implement? If so, what were their views and how have their views influenced your decision?	Staff were consulted in June 2018. The public and members were consulted in 2014. All the consultation showed that religious belief was not a factor in whether or not respondents supported the arrangements (staff) or inconvenienced by the office closures (public) *
If you have not consulted or engaged with communities that are likely to be affected by the policy or decision, give details about when you intend to carry out consultation or provide reasons for why you feel this is not necessary:	

Use this section to assess any potential impact on equality groups based on what you now know.

Description of impact	Nature of impact Positive, neutral, adverse (explain why)	Extent of impact Low, medium, high (use L, M or H)
Age	Neutral	low
Disability	Neutral	low
Gender	Neutral	low
Gender reassignment	Neutral	low
Marriage/civil partnership	Neutral	low
Pregnancy/maternity	Neutral	low
Race	Neutral	low
Religion/belief	Neutral * (see comment)	low
Sexual orientation	Neutral	low
Does the EqIA indicate that the policy or decision would have a medium or high adverse impact on one or more equality groups?	No x Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	If 'YES', use the action plan to describe the adverse impacts and what mitigating actions you could put in place.

Action plan to address and monitor adverse impacts

What are the potential adverse impacts?	What are the mitigating actions?	Date they will be achieved.
N/A at this stage		