

COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

17 JUNE 2015

REPORT OF HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS

CHILDREN'S CENTRE - CUSTOMER SERVICES RESOURCES

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To update Members on the impact on Customer Services resources at the children's centres following notification from LCC of the withdrawal of funding for this service and to make suggestions for revised service provision.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 **That Customer Services continue to offer a more flexible "reception" service at the Cove and Edge Children's Centres while testing out future options and pending a more detailed further review.**
- 2.2 **The "surgery" service at Fairmead continues and it trialled at the Edge where considered appropriate**
- 2.3 **That a further report is prepared in the autumn which considers the implications of Me and My Learning and the future of services at the Children's Centres to include a full option appraisal for the future customer service support to be provided through the centres and opportunities to collaborate with community organisations renting space and providing reception service**

3.0 KEY ISSUES

- 3.1 As reported in March, Leicestershire County Council have been contributing £47k for a reception service at the children's centres. Melton Borough Council has used this money to fund the equivalent of 2.2 trained Customer Service Advisors which enabled the opening of all 3 centres for a full face to face service from 9am-5pm, five days a week. Since 1 April 2015, the service available to customers at Fairmead has reduced with Customer Services operating a "drop in" surgery style service for 2 half days a week. Discussions are currently underway with Family Voices regarding the occupation of Fairmead and the ability for them to have a presence there
- 3.2 Following a county wide review of children and young people services, LCC have confirmed that they will no longer be funding £47k for this service. They have agreed an amount of £24k for 2015/16 and this will be the final payment.
- 3.3 A recent survey conducted with MBC customers at the Children's Centres showed that just over half (54%) of the customers attended the centre primarily to access a service from MBC. This was less at the Edge where only 38% of customers went specifically for MBC services. The main reason for visiting the Edge was to attend an activity either facilitated by LCC or a community activity.
- 3.4 This trend is apparent in the foot fall figures which has shown that since LCC reduced the number of activities at the centres the foot fall has dropped in April and May. In May 2014 the footfall at the centres was 382 customers and in May 2015 it was 250. There has been a slight increase at Parkside, in May 2014 the advisors saw 585 customers and in

May 2015 they saw 610 customers. This tells us that on average the Advisors saw 5 customers a day at the Edge and 7 customers a day at the Cove.

- 3.5 95% of the customers told us that they prefer to access MBC services at the centres due to shorter wait times and their location, however 25% of the customers also come to Parkside. The customers using Parkside also access services from Job Centre Plus (30%), CAB (10%), Health (5%) and Money Advice (5%)
- 3.6 The reasons for seeing an Advisor at the centres was split mainly between benefit and housing queries. 18% wanted to report a housing issue/repair, 16% wanted to submit evidence for a benefit claim, 12% wanted to make a payment and 12% wanted to advise us of a change in their circumstances. The more complex matters for example making a housing application or a new benefit claim only amounted to a very small percentage of the matters being dealt with.
- 3.7 The centres are currently resourced with fully trained Advisors who have the capability to deal with a full range of the more complex transactions for our customers including benefit processing. This data suggests that the skills and knowledge required to successfully respond to the customer demand is at a lower level than currently being resourced.
- 3.8 Face to face service is the most expensive channel. Data from Socitm (professional body for management and leadership of IT and digital services) suggest that the face to face channel costs £8.62 per transaction while the telephone costs £2.83 and the website just 15 pence. Customers were asked if they had tried to resolve their query online and 94% said no. 29% said they prefer face to face, 27% said they did not have internet access, 13% said they don't know how to use the internet and 11% were visiting the centres anyway.
- 3.9 Me and My Learning (M&ML) is supporting digital independence amongst our more vulnerable customers many of whom are our tenants and benefit claimants. From the data regarding customer enquiries it appears to be the same or similar group of customers. Computers with internet access are available at Phoenix House, still accessible to those currently using the Cove. Family learning through M&ML is being delivered at the centres and IT will also be able to be accessed there from September. The Transformation Programme is bringing more services on line and while housing is still in the discovery phase, considerable progress have been made towards benefits and payments online. Customers are able to complete new claims and submit evidence on line and the process for advising MBC of a change of circumstance is due to be launched soon.
- 3.10 Evidence from the survey suggests that it is not the best use of resources to continue to staff the centres all day with fully trained advisors for the following reasons:
 - The footfall at the centres appears to be dropping
 - The level of queries at the centres are more routine and less complex
 - Face to face is the most expensive way to deliver the service.

However it is also noted that while advisors are at the centres they are engaged in activities not specifically around MBC customer queries but more to do with the day to day running and organisation of the centres ie opening and closing up, signing people in and out, signposting to other services and dealing with adhoc general queries. These activities still need to be undertaken however they do not always need to be undertaken by Customer Service Advisors. This requires co-ordination with other services ie the Community Caretakers and sports team who organise activities to ensure customers are still able to access the activities and further discussion with LCC who are responsible for some of these activities.

- 3.11 Further work is required to understand the impact of the continued Me and My Learning service and the future use of the Children's Centres following the LCC review. LCC have

developed a new offer that will not be fully operational until October in relation to new services and are looking at their process for reception duties as well. It is therefore suggested that any changes to the service provision at the centres is a temporary change while these matters are worked through. It is proposed that the surgery type service is introduced to the Edge which has lower footfall than the Cove and that the timings of these sessions are in line with the activities arranged at the centre. It is also suggested that a better use of resource would be to allow more skilled Advisors to remain at Parkside while staff with less knowledge would still be able to deliver a reception service at the Cove with the ability to take details on housing issues to be phoned through to Parkside and photo copy evidence for claims for example. This would also allow time for general administration tasks to be dealt with at the centres. Early discussions are also being held with other partners regarding the best place to deliver services for example Latham House and with community groups on how we can work together to make the best use of the centres. These discussions will also influence who we work in Customer Services in the future.

- 3.12 MBC have agreed a lease with the Vineyard Church to occupy part of the Cove, there maybe opportunities for them to deliver a reception service as well at contributing to the cost of the occupation. Discussions are also in hand with Family Voices and Shout for Residents to deliver various community based services such as supporting local residents in accessing online services in a voluntary capacity. There may also be way in which local community groups can support our community work and deliver low level support such as for example reception service and IT help.

4.0 **POLICY AND CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 The new Intensive Housing Management service has been operational since 1 April 2015 and is still being embedded. This has an impact on how services are delivered along with Me and My Learning.
- 4.2 [One of the aims of the Transformation Programme is to support customers to move to using digital services and placing less reliance on a full face to face service supports this aim](#)".

5.0 **FINANCIAL AND OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The withdrawal of the £47k funding does impact on the resources available to deliver Customer Services ongoing and how and where it is delivered. The service is not fully resourced at the moment and two advisors are due to leave, as a result of voluntary resignation, at the end of the month. Some temporary recruitment is currently underway however if changes to service delivery are not made there is a risk performance in other areas may drop ie time to process a benefit claim, wait times at Parkside and length of time to answer telephone calls. A drop in performance not only results in lower levels of customer satisfaction but also an increase in customer demand for example, customers chasing claims.
- 5.2 Customer Service Advisors are currently paid on a career grade from Band 4 (£15,523) to Band 6 (£19,742) depending on skills and knowledge. Historically it has been the higher skilled advisors who have provided the service at the centres after they were originally deployed to the centres following the fire at the Nottingham Road Offices. The Childrens Centres became the main contact point for all customers. Since the opening of Parkside the customer demand at the centres has changed. As this demand has shifted towards less complex queries at the centres it is anticipated that staff employed at the lower grade will have sufficient skills to deliver a reception service at the centres leaving higher skilled staff to deal with more complex cases including triage at Parkside.

- 5.4 The current cost of delivering the face to face service at the Edge based on current volumes of customers and currently salary is approx. £15.14 per visit which is significantly higher than the predicted cost of face to face from Socitm of £8.62
- 5.3 The MTFS recently approved by the Council assumed that should the funding be withdrawn for this service the costs would reduce accordingly therefore this was not highlighted as a specific financial risk. As such no provision has been made to continue funding the costs of providing a reception service at the children's Centres and should this be determined as the preferred option then this would need additional funding allocated from the council's own resources which are already under considerable pressure from funding cuts.

6.0 **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS/POWERS**

- 6.1 Contracts and agreements with users of the Childrens Centres will need to be kept in mind to ensure MBC are still meeting their duties in relation to reception cover and the opening and closing of the building.
- 6.2 There are no other legal requirements to continue to deliver the same service as currently exists and the centres

7.0 **COMMUNITY SAFETY**

- 7.1 The centres are designated safe refuge point for members of the public as part of the Countywide Safe Places Scheme and therefore consideration needs to be given to the impact on this
- 7.2 The centres are located in the priority neighbourhoods and therefore reach customers with highest levels of vulnerability. The impact of any modification in the levels of service provided at the centres will require careful consideration.

8.0 **EQUALITIES**

- 8.1 A full impact assessment should be completed on the use of the Customer Service at the children's centres to fully appreciate the implications of any recommendations to modifying the service

9.0 **RISKS**

9.1

Probability



Very High A		1		
High B		2		
Significant C			3	
Low D				
Very Low E				
Almost Impossible F				
	IV Neg- ligible	III Marg- inal	II Critical	I Catast- rophic

Impact →

Risk No.	Description
1	No changes are made to service delivery results in an ongoing budget overspend of £47K
2	Total withdrawal of CS at centres impacts on most vulnerable customers
3	Overstretching CS resources impact on service delivery and reputation

10.0 CLIMATE CHANGE

10.1 No direct implications for climate change.

11.0 CONSULTATION

11.1 Consultation needs to be undertaken with staff, members and service users. This information will help inform the impact assessment and any recommendations for modifications to the service

12.0 WARDS AFFECTED

12.1 The three centres are located in Egerton Ward, Dorian Ward and Sysonby Ward

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Date: 8 June 2015

Appendices: None

Background Papers: CSA report March 2015

Reference: