

From: Susan Carey, Cabinet Member for Customers, Communications and Performance

Amanda Beer, Corporate Director People & Communications

To: Policy & Resources Cabinet Committee – 13 June 2019

Subject: Review of face-to-face customer contact provision

Classification: Unrestricted

**Past Pathway of Paper:** Not Applicable

**Future Pathway of Paper:** Policy & Resources Cabinet Committee

**Summary:** This report reviews the role of KCC's corporate face-to-face contact channel in supporting our strategic purpose and preventative strategies. It sets out the next steps to explore opportunities and future delivery options, working collaboratively with district councils to ensure joined up access to services for Kent's residents.

**Recommendation:**

The Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee is invited to CONSIDER and ENDORSE the recommendations to:

- Develop a customer contact strategy.
- Consider all possible methods of service delivery, particularly with libraries and children's centres or potentially through community outreach, as part of the new customer contact strategy.
- Work within KCC and with district councils to review operations to ensure support for preventative strategies and better support digital inclusion.
- Continue work with district councils to explore opportunities to reduce the cost of operations and increase income in Gateways prior to the end of the current contracts, at which point KCC will be exiting Gateways.

To NOTE:

- A customer contact strategy for KCC will be tabled for discussion at a future Policy & Resources Cabinet Committee.

## 1. Introduction

1.1 An essential part of any organisation's drive towards excellent customer service is a clear and effective strategy for managing customer contact.

1.2 KCC ensures that residents and service users can access services and information in a range of ways that suit their needs – online, by telephone or in person.

- 1.3 The design and management of each corporate contact channel aims to reflect KCC's strategic purpose, focusing on helping individuals, families and communities to be more resilient and support themselves wherever possible. Each contact channel is designed around the needs of customers and service users, rather than the needs of service providers or professionals.
- 1.4 Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee received update reports on our online channel (kent.gov.uk) in December 2017 and our Contact Point in March 2018 and January 2019. This paper concentrates on the remaining key pillar of customer contact – face-to-face provision.
- 1.5 Having reviewed arrangements across all our contact channels, it is now intended to produce a customer contact strategy. The strategy will focus on the importance of corporate customer contact service provision and its continuous improvement. The buildings, infrastructure and mechanisms for this service provision, whilst requiring careful thought and consideration, will be driven by the strategic objectives and can and should be flexible to meet local needs and availability.
- 1.6 It is difficult to make direct comparisons in terms of the cost of each contact route because of the inherent difference in the delivery models. By far the most widely used method of contact to find information and access services is through our website. This is also the least costly access route, followed by contact by phone.
- 1.7 Through our renegotiated contract with Agilisys, we have introduced further savings to the cost of handling calls and placed a greater emphasis on quality.
- 1.8 KCC incurs both property and operational costs in the provision of the current Gateways. The total 2018/19 cost was circa £1.3m. Since 2017, 17% has been taken out of the operating budget to bring the cost of face-to-face provision down to a more proportionate level.
- 1.9 In reviewing the role and value of providing face-to-face contact in the context of supporting KCC's strategic purpose we recognise that each contact costs more to serve than those of other channels. However, we recognise there is a role for face-to-face contact as part of the overall offer. In developing the customer contact strategy, focus will be placed on how our face-to-face services can provide improved early support, offering better value for money for Kent taxpayers.
- 1.10 Part of the development of our customer contact strategy will be to facilitate people who do not use online as their first option feeling able to do so for any future transactions or advice.
- 1.11 The Asset Utilisation and Business Change programmes will also influence the design of the strategy, aiming to achieve a more equitable and effective spread of face-to-face access to services dependent on community need and within

existing KCC buildings such as libraries and children's centres, or potentially through outreach service provision in other community venues.

## **2. Customer contact principles and objectives**

2.1 The fundamental principles underpinning effective customer contact aligned to the Authority's strategic objectives are:

- using insight to better understand customer needs
- designing services around customers
- providing excellent customer service and excelling at service delivery
- delivering personally relevant communications to the right people at the right time in the right way on the right channels
- working with organisations across the public, voluntary and private sectors as a commissioning Authority and delivery partner to facilitate access to services whoever delivers them and provide joined-up signposting and responses to complex customer needs.

2.2 It is important to recognise when developing effective face-to-face contact that, whilst it will be open to all residents, enquiries and help are more likely to be sought from people who:

- are seeking to speak to someone face-to-face to get the support they need or get help to navigate seemingly complex public services to find local services that can help them whichever tier of government, private or voluntary agency delivers them
- have complex needs
- are facing a multitude of issues affecting, or affected by, their mental and physical health.
- are facing financial hardship
- lack basic digital skills so need help to complete forms and access support, such as Blue Badges and bus passes (KCC services)
- need assistance with benefits and housing (district/borough services)

2.3 Customers may present with a very specific enquiry or they may explain their current situation without knowing what support or help they need. Customer contact staff need to be trained to identify and deal with multiple needs and to spot the vulnerability of some customers and any safeguarding issues.

2.4 Identifying issues at the first point of contact, enabling customers to find and navigate the right services to manage their situation and take control of what happens to them, can improve outcomes and prevent customers returning in crisis at a later date. Any consideration of the value of face-to-face contact should recognise this potential for reducing demand on higher end services and helping people lead independent lives, by getting this initial contact right.

2.5 The County Council has an important community leadership role in the county. Having a visible presence in communities can provide a reassuring presence for residents and is of reputational importance to the council.

### **3. Current provision of face-to-face services**

- 3.1 Residents in Kent experience personal interaction with Kent County Council through all our frontline staff providing services directly to individuals and communities. The customer experience resulting from this interaction is key to the perception of service users and residents and excellence in customer service will always be a key priority for our service directorates. The corporate customer contact strategy needs to enhance this.
- 3.2 The current provision of corporate face-to-face contact in terms of general information-giving, signposting and query resolution is through our Gateways which were first established in 2005 when the customer contact landscape was very different. The motivation behind Gateways was as much about the buildings as the customer contact and it explicitly aimed to provide a well-designed, retail environment in town centre locations. This is no longer a determining factor.
- 3.3 There are currently 10 Gateways across the county: in Ashford, Dover, Edenbridge, Gravesend, Sheerness, Swanley, Tenterden, Thanet, Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells. Each Gateway has been set up in partnership with the relevant district council. Six Gateways are co-located with libraries, and some of these buildings are also home to Adult Education, Day Care Services for adults with learning disabilities and children's social care.
- 3.4 Face-to-face contact is also provided in areas where Gateway provision does not exist, through libraries, children's centres and district council offices. There is an opportunity, through the development of the customer contact strategy, to learn how the face-to-face services delivered in these areas support KCC's strategic purpose and preventative strategies.
- 3.5 It is difficult to accurately compare the value of providing face-to-face services with the cost per transaction of the website and the contact centre because the people needing face to face contact either lack basic digital skills and need help to access online services, or have complex needs or multiple problems that would be very difficult to access online or by phone.
- 3.6 Members confirmed in 2016 that due to the high transactional costs of Gateways from KCC's perspective, steps should be taken to relocate services where possible and as soon as possible. At three Policy & Resources Cabinet Committees that year, decisions were endorsed to relocate KCC services from Gateways and it is therefore not intended to renew contracts with districts for Gateways as they expire (as shown in Appendix 1).
- 3.7 A key outcome for the customer contact strategy will be to achieve its objectives whilst also reducing this total spend. We will work collaboratively with district councils to jointly explore any opportunities to reduce costs across the system where possible. This will include mutually exiting from Gateway agreements where there is an appetite to do so and with alternative service provision agreed.

#### **4. Engagement with district councils**

- 4.1 It has been important to engage with district councils to understand the role face-to-face contact has in the delivery of their future strategies and explore the possibility of working together to reduce costs and improve operations. This will help ensure success in one of the priorities for customer contact which is to enable residents to access information that allows them to find the required service or access the support they need regardless of which part of the public sector, or commissioned supplier, delivers it.
- 4.2 It is also important to note that our existing Gateways are provided in partnership with districts and there are opportunities to co-locate any future customer contact provision with districts.
- 4.3 The following themes of importance to districts came out of these conversations:
- Having a face-to-face service remains a key priority despite the fact it is an expensive contact channel when compared with online and phone
  - Face-to-face remains a vital lifeline to people who lack basic digital skills or whose problems are too complicated to be resolved by completing an online form
  - Face-to-face services support early prevention policies and can help avoid costly interventions at later stages
  - It offers visibility in the community, an important profile for councils
  - The operating model needs to be reviewed to reflect today's needs and better support the digital inclusion agenda

These themes align closely to KCC's intentions and this will facilitate working closely on next steps.

## **5. Recommendations**

The Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee is invited to CONSIDER and ENDORSE the recommendations to:

- Develop a customer contact strategy.
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- Work within KCC and with district councils to review operations to ensure support for preventative strategies and better support digital inclusion.
- Continue work with district councils to explore opportunities to reduce the cost of operations and increase income in Gateways prior to the end of the current contracts, at which point KCC will be exiting Gateways.

To NOTE:

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## Gateway contract end dates

<b>Gateway location</b>	<b>Contract end</b>
<b>Tonbridge</b>	July 2024
<b>Tenterden</b> (located with library and Post Office)	December 2023
<b>Dover</b>	March 2024
<b>Tunbridge Wells</b>	November 2024, but contract will mutually end upon completion of Cultural Hub
<b>Gravesend</b>	December 2025
<b>Ashford</b> (located with library and other KCC services)	July 2026
<b>Sheppey</b> (located with library and other KCC services)	October 2026
<b>Thanet</b> (located with library)	January 2027
<b>Swanley</b> (located with library, Post Office and other community services)	November 2030 (contract in place with Swanley Town Council)
<b>Edenbridge</b> (located with library, church and other KCC and community services)	N/A – no contract in place with district council