

**A Review of Customer Access for Vulnerable Customers
at Mid Devon District Council**

March 2024

**A review by a Working Group of the Community Policy
Development Group**

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Introduction

Local Government continues to face growing pressure on resources, with a need to focus on efficiency and value for money. At the same time, however, customers expect a high quality service when dealing with their Local Authority. Balancing the complex nature of Councils and the range of departments, with provision of a seamless service on a tight budget can be challenging.

This report examines access to customer service for those vulnerable in our communities and if/how the reduced opening hours at Phoenix House may have impacted them. Through analysis of data and evidence, feedback from Members and staff, the Working Group has considered the full customer experience when they get in touch with the Council with a specific focus on accessibility for our vulnerable customers.

Rationale for the review

Delivering a positive customer experience is a priority for Mid Devon District Council (MDDC).

Members had been made aware by a small number of residents expressing their disquiet about the reduced opening hours at Phoenix House. Some members expressed concern that this may be disadvantaging those most in need. Issues were also raised about residents arriving at Phoenix House only to find us closed.

The chairman of Community PDG determined that a working group to assess current practice and impact on customers would be helpful. A review of accessibility would enable better understanding for members and provide an opportunity to identify improvements on the customer experience.

Scope

The Working Group agreed that the following scope would form the Review:

“To review the customer experience at Phoenix House in the context of our most vulnerable customer”.

- To look at the possibility of a doorbell on the front door or an intercom service.
- Free telephone number (for those that cannot afford to pay for calls).
- Text messages for deaf people.
- To look at possibility of vending machines or a coffee shop in reception.
- To gather additional data by people affected by the opening times.
- To consider public transport and how this would link into our opening times.

Desired Outcomes

- To provide specific support to the homeless.
- To provide out of hours support.
- To provide appointments face-to-face or via telephone.
- To consider free parking at the front of the building.
- To consider different opening hours to support vulnerable people.

Methodology and Approach

Members of the Working Group were agreed by the Community PDG as:

Cllrs. B Holdman, C Connor, G Cochran, A Glover, C Harrower

The first meeting of the Working Group took place in on 18 Sept 2023, during which Cllr Ben Holdman was elected Chairman. Subsequent meetings took place on 30 November 2023, and 22 February 2024.

Members were clear from the outset that they needed to understand the customer experience across all channels and access to staff through those channels. Areas reviewed were as follows:

- Current contact centre hours
- Availability of appointments when closed to the public
- Duration of standard appointments and access to facilities e.g. toilets, water etc.
- Ability to access the council for those presenting to the building, particularly for those presenting in crisis e.g. Homeless
- Access for Out of Hours assistance
- Current footfall

An overview of how the Contact Centre and Enquiries service worked, provision of previous survey results and current practices were provided and reference was made to previous committee reports which had provided the information.

Members discussed issues around transport, access to the building and facilities whilst customers were in Phoenix House.

Discussions on different vulnerabilities and the challenges presented in interacting with the Council took place. Including how staff identify vulnerability, how it can be hidden, permanent and temporary vulnerability and if/how customers self-identify or share their circumstances. Particular focus was those customers presenting as Homeless and the ability to make contact during office hours.

A survey focussing on access challenges was developed for the group by the Corporate Manager for Digital Transformation & Customer Engagement.

Outcomes

The group reviewed current practice and are comfortable that access to council services generally covers the needs of the most vulnerable and that different channels deliver for those with varying needs. It also acknowledges that there are policies and practices in place which allow for staff to individualise service based on customer needs within our legal/statutory duties.

The number and duration of visits negated additional refreshment requirements and that the neighbouring library was in receipt of a grant to facilitate 'warm spaces' during the winter.

The group have raised concern about the Disabled Parking at the front of Phoenix House. They feel that charging for this parking for Blue Badge holders is wrong and that the requirement for disabled drivers to have to cross a busy car park to pay makes visiting the premises unnecessarily difficult. With the potential increase of such visitors due to an increased presence of partner agencies on site, the group feel that this should be reviewed.

The Public Access group have proposed that the Parking working group consider allowing for 1 hour free parking for Blue Badge holders to facilitate access to Phoenix house for disabled customers. This request has been forwarded to the relevant service managers for consideration by the Corporate Manager for Digital Transformation & Customer Engagement.

The one caveat to the above was access to staff in person during standard office hours for those unaware of our opening hours or in crisis and in need of help.

To that end the group considered the provision of an intercom at the front of the building that could enable contact with a member of staff to assess need and either make an appointment for a mutually convenient time/date or source a member of staff to assist the customer who is in urgent need.

The group felt that the provision of an intercom solution would be the best way forward. If this could be provided the solution would meet the needs of customers as had been expressed to them. They felt that this then negated the need for a survey. The group agreed that this would only need to be accessible Mon-Fri between 09:00 and 17:00 to cover those periods when the building was closed to the public, e.g. afternoons and Wednesdays.

The group will therefore be requesting that the Community PDG make a recommendation to Cabinet that authorisation is sought for the installation of a handset to be placed at the front of the building which is accessible.

The group agreed that on the completion of this report and decision from Cabinet that the working group would disband. An analysis of use of any intercom would be done six months after installation and that further concerns about access to services for the vulnerable would be done via the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion group which is made up of a number of members and officers from different services.