

## **The cessation of fortnightly surgeries at Cullompton and Crediton**

### **Background**

As part of a decision to rationalise council services and meet a balanced budget, the council withdrew its staff and services from the offices in Crediton on 1 April 2016.

A proposed amendment to the budget to retain services at the Crediton Office was put forward at the meeting of full council on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2016. This proposal was supported by 4 councillors (plus one abstention), with the rest of the council voting against. As such officers implemented the decision as agreed by council.

When this full time service ended the staff employed in Crediton were made redundant and the budget removed from the Customer First (CF) budget.

Since then, officers have provided a fortnightly 'surgery' in Crediton and Cullompton on alternate Mondays. This was agreed as a transitional arrangement, not least since the council was incurring fixed IT costs in Crediton until August 2017 i.e. it made sense operationally to utilise the facilities that existed while they were available.

The surgeries ceased entirely from August 2017 and are no longer provided. The budget has been cut, and the IT facilities no longer exist to access the council's systems from these locations.

Visitor numbers for last year were (this year's figures (2017/18) are not directly comparable since we gave additional warning of surgeries closing and there are no numbers for Crediton/Cullompton since the surgeries were stopped in August):

| Visitors | Tiverton | Crediton | Cullompton |
|----------|----------|----------|------------|
| 2016-17  | 32,622   | 359      | 152        |

### **Current Service Delivery**

Last year (2016-17) the CF target for answering calls was reduced to 85% to reflect the reduction in resource. Although the call centre staff were able to exceed this target for external calls, overall only 82% of all calls were answered. In total over 25,000 calls were not answered.

Online form submissions (digital transactions) have increased from 16,600 in 2015/16 to 31,700 in 2016/17, and ongoing increases in digital self-service facilitate the reduction in staff resource. However, responding to email, web contacts and social media is resource intensive and is increasing year on year – changing the channel profile of how we support customers in Mid Devon.

### **Planning for Future Services**

Increasingly, the council is asked to provide more online services and to accept documents and applications online. We need to be able to support customers as

more government services (and other associated functions) go online. Increasingly, our customer service role at the front desk, or via the telephone, is about helping people conduct their business online, rather than finding an alternative approach for them.

As a significant example, next year Universal Credit (UC) is being implemented in Devon. This is only accessed online and the role of MDDC staff will be to signpost people to other organisations or to online transactions. This is very much the direction of travel and demonstrates the move away from traditional access channels. Our role will always extend to supporting those most vulnerable, but will often mean helping them to access the information or processes that they need; this may be by providing public access PCs or signposting customers to other agencies that can help.

Many government services are already online only, or assisted online, such as DVLA for car tax, HMRC for income tax, DWP for job seekers allowance and Universal Credit.

### **The impact of further reducing available resources in Tiverton to provide surgeries**

Ultimately the decision to cut resources is felt through an increase in customer waiting times, assuming transactions across channels remain constant. In relation to any consideration of off-site provision, increased costs for mileage and travel time would be added to the cost of the service.

Overall demand for the surgeries has been low and the table below shows actual numbers each month.

| 16/17 | April | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar |
|-------|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Cred  | 26    | 16  | 49  | 16  | 15  | 33  | 21  | 28  | 31  | 19  | 41  | 64  |
| Cull  | 11    | 11  | 22  | 13  | 7   | 11  | 14  | 9   | 13  | 8   | 15  | 18  |

March is the busiest month after the annual rent account and council tax bills have been issued. There is also an increase in emails, phone calls and other social media at this time and any reduction in resource delays response times across all channels. Bringing all customer service (first point of contact) into one location has been managed well; it is important that customers have a consistent and easy-to-use means of contacting the council. This will ensure that vulnerable customers can be responded to as quickly as possible as resource is allocated to the multi-channel contact centre, enabling more senior or specialist officers to respond to more complex enquiries.

There has been no increase in complaints or impact to debt recovery to the council since removing the payment facility in Crediton in 2016. There have been no surgeries since the end of August and I am unaware of any issues relating to this.

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