

# Report to Cabinet

**23 March 2022**

<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Revenues and Benefits Operating Model</b>
<b>Cabinet Member:</b>	Councillor Maria Crompton Cabinet Member Finance and Resources
<b>Director:</b>	Simone Hines Director of Finance Neil Cox Director for Business Strategy and Change
<b>Key Decision:</b>	No
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Ian Dunn Revenues and Benefits Service Manager

## 1 Recommendations

That Cabinet approve:

- 1.1 The Revenues and Benefits Operating Model as set out in Appendix 1.
- 1.2 The face to face Cashiers service at Kings Square, West Bromwich, and Smethwick Council House not be reopened.
- 1.3 The Revenues and Benefits customer service at Kings Square, West Bromwich not be reopened.
- 1.4 Subject to the above, the Kings Square office in West Bromwich be closed.



## 2 Background and Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 The majority of service requests dealt with by the Revenues and Benefits Service are now available online through MySandwell enabling customers to self-serve rather than use the costly face-to-face and telephone methods of contact.
- 2.2 The introduction of payment kiosks at Oldbury and Smethwick has further increased the number of self-serve transactions.
- 2.3 The availability of online services has significantly reduced face-to-face contact and in November 2019 the Cabinet Member for Finance, Council Sustainability and Transformation approved a reduction in opening hours at Kings Square, West Bromwich and Smethwick Council House to part-time hours.
- 2.4 In August 2021 Cabinet were briefed on the potential to close services as detailed in 1.1 to 1.3 and at that time Cabinet did not want to make any changes to the cashiers and Revenues and Benefits service provision but agreed to reconsider this in 3 months.

### Cashiers service:

- 3.1 Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020 no cashier or Revenues and Benefits services have been provided at Kings Square West Bromwich or Smethwick Council House.
- 3.2 Since the reopening of Oldbury Council House in June 2021 and moving to full-time opening in September 2021 the number of customers visiting Cashiers has dropped significantly compared to pre-pandemic numbers. The table below details the total number of transactions over a 6-month period for 2019 and 2021:

	June	July	August	Sept	October	Nov	Dec	Total
2019	3997	4581	4168	4242	4152	3808	2941	28,277
2021	337	322	458	523	556	620	362	3,178



- 3.3 This evidences that there has been a reduction of 25,099 transactions in the same period in 2021 compared to 2019. This equates to an 80% reduction in the number of transactions
- 3.4 In addition, the 2 payment kiosks (card and cash) located in Oldbury Council House which have been available for customers to use from 15<sup>th</sup> December 2021, took 145 transactions amounting to over £22,000. Two further card-only kiosks located outside Oldbury Council House will also be operational soon. Over 80% of the payments taken manually by a cashier could be paid at a kiosk. We therefore anticipate that the need for a customer to see a cashier will reduce further.
- 3.5 Since the introduction of the payment kiosks in December 2021, approximately 33% of transactions taken by a cashier were repeat customers paying by cheque. The kiosks can accept cheque payments and we are aiming to introduce this new functionality in the future along with the ability to accept miscellaneous payments.
- 3.6 There are 13 different payment methods available to customer and these are:
- Cash
  - Cheque/postal order
  - Debit Card
  - Credit card
  - Bank Giro
  - Online
  - Telephone payment
  - Automated telephone
  - Paypoint
  - Post Office
  - Kiosks
  - Direct Debit
  - Standing Order
- 3.7 Long periods of office closures during the pandemic has resulted in the majority of customers moving to cashless/digital/self-serve payment



methods and therefore the need to provide a face-to-face cashier service has diminished. Analysis of the value of transactions by payment method for 6 month periods from before and during the pandemic confirms this and is shown in the table below.

Payment method	1.10.19 to 31.3.20	1.10.20 to 31.3.21	Difference
Cash	£7,803,082	£333,955	£7,469,127 decrease
Post office	£2,757,376	£5,104,629	£2,347,253 increase
Debit card	£21,849,319	£24,617,061	£2,767,742 increase
PayPal	£2,146,717	£2,853,841	£707,124 increase

## Revenues and Benefits service

- 4.1 Prior to March 2020, the Revenues and Benefits Service provided face-to-face and telephone customer services at 3 sites:
- Kings Square, West Bromwich (face-to-face)
  - Oldbury Council House (face-to-face)
  - Contact centre – based at Oldbury Council House
- 4.2 Officers in the customer services team had to be split over the 3 sites, and even though footfall was low at Kings Square, for security reasons at least 2 customer advisors and a supervisor had to be located there. Operating from several sites took valuable resource away from our contact centre where the daily average abandonment rate was over 25%. This indicated that customers were trying to telephone us to get the help they needed.
- 4.3 Since March 2020 the service has solely operated from the contact centre and all of the staff are based on the telephones, with customers still having the option to have a face-to-face appointment at Oldbury or a virtual meeting via Microsoft (MS) Teams. Customers can also email the team with their enquiry.
- 4.4 Since August 2021, customer services have had 38 appointments, and these have been carried out over the telephone or via MS Teams. In



many cases doing the appointments virtually is more beneficial to the customer, as when documentation/information is required they have this at hand and therefore additional/follow-up contact is not necessary.

4.5 The new operating model has led to a significant reduction in the telephone abandonment rate which is now consistently below 3% and we are now receiving fewer complaints about wait times from customers and councillors. This indicates that we are providing an improved service to our customers.




4.6 The Kings Square building is solely used by Revenues and Benefits Service and Cashiers and is also being considered under the development of the indoor market in West Bromwich.

4.7 If the recommendations in the report are approved the operating model for Revenues and Benefits from April 2022 will be as follows:

- A face to face Customer Service facility at Oldbury Council House by appointment, Monday to Friday between 9am and 5pm.
- A daily Customer Advisor presence at Oldbury Council House to manage these appointments and any walk-in demand, subject to availability
- The availability of appointments to be carried out over the telephone or by Microsoft Teams
- A Customer Service Contact Centre to deal with a wide range of enquiries over the telephone or by email
- A daily Cashiers Service at Oldbury Council House supported by self-service payment kiosks at the Council House, Smethwick and Blackheath
- Provision to make payments at our partner facilities, such as the Post Office or Paypoint or over the telephone
- A comprehensive range of online facilities via My Sandwell.



## 5 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	<p>People live well and age well – Revenues and Benefits provides a number of services which support low income/vulnerable households. It also provides the main source of income for the council through collection of Council Tax and Business Rates. This income is used to deliver key council services.</p>
	<p>Quality homes in thriving neighbourhoods– Administration of Housing Benefit, Council Tax Reduction and Discretionary Housing Payments provides crucial financial support to our lowest income households and prevents homelessness.</p>
	<p>A strong and inclusive economy – ensuring businesses get the business rates reliefs they are entitled to supports this priority.</p>

## 6 Alternative Options

- 6.1 To continue to provide a face-to-face Revenues and Benefits customer service at Kings Square West Bromwich and continue to provide a face-to-face Cashiers service at Kings Square, West Bromwich, and Smethwick Council House.
- 6.2 These were considered however based upon the reduction in demand at Oldbury Council House for cashiers since this reopened in June 2021, and the change in how residents are now accessing Revenues and Benefits' services indicates that there isn't a need or demand from residents to reopen these offices, nor would it be cost-effective to do so as we would have to recruit additional staff.

## 7 Implications

<p><b>Resources:</b></p>	<p>Not reopening these offices will achieve savings of £139,200 in a full year by reducing staffing levels in cashiers. This can be achieved by deleting vacancies therefore no staff would be at risk. Revenues and Benefits customer services staffing levels would not be affected.</p>
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<b>Legal and Governance:</b>	No implications
<b>Risk:</b>	No implications
<b>Equality:</b>	No implications
<b>Health and Wellbeing:</b>	No implications
<b>Social Value</b>	No Implications

7.1 The current structure and vacancies in cashiers are as follows:

Role/Grade	Number of staff	Vacancies
Team manager grade H	1	0
Supervisor grade F	1	0
Technical officers E	2	0
Cashiers D	7 FTE's	2.4 FTE's

7.2 The new cashier's structure would be:

Role/Grade	Number of staff
Supervisor grade F	1
Technical officers E	2
Cashiers D	3.6 FTE's

7.3 The reduction in Cashiers at Band D from 7 to 3.6 would be found by deleting the 2.4 FTE vacancies and the additional cashier Band D 1 FTE could be found from the staff who have put in an expression of interest to leave the council. This will save £79,200 p.a. The Team manager grade H has also put in for planned leavers and due to the size of the cashiers team reducing there is an opportunity to delete this position and move cashiers under another service/Team manager. This would save an additional £60k.

7.4 The on-going work to reduce cash payments across the council will provide further opportunities to look at the cashier's structure which may lead to further budget savings moving forward.



7.5 The changes above will deliver the savings target included in the budget for 2022/23 in relation to the new operating model in Revenues and Benefits.

## 8 Appendices

Appendix 1 – Proposed Revenues and Benefits Operating Model

## 9 Background Papers

Not applicable

