

Chief Executive's Budget Proposals Future Council Project

Public Consultation Feedback	
Theme	Customer Contact
Definition	We have to be serious about moving our customers away from expensive ways of contacting us – targeting those who need face to face support.

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1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 The future plans and budget proposal within the change theme of 'Customer Contact' are presented for Members within this report. Also presented is the quantitative feedback received through the consultation questionnaire and a summary of the main themes emerging through qualitative feedback, from sources such as the consultation questionnaire, meetings with groups and letters, emails and other communications sent directly into the consultation process.

2.0 BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

2.1 Consultees were provided a range of information detailing the background, level of savings, potential impact and methods of mitigating any potential negative impact for each individual option. This information included:

- Questionnaire: The questionnaire provided a summary of each option and provided the opportunity for respondents to select one of four choices indicating their opinion on the option.
- Consultation Pack: One document containing information on the change themes and all associated budget proposals was produced and made available at Council buildings and on the website.
- Summary Paper: Four summary papers (one per change theme) were produced and were available online and through Council buildings. These papers provided a summary of each option, including the level of savings involved and some background information.
- Business Cases: These papers provided information regarding the background to the option, the potential impact if the option was implemented, proposed methods to mitigate that impact and also the potential savings associated with the option.

2.2 The consultation questionnaire and associated consultation pack was made available in Easy Read, and distributed widely through Council and voluntary, community and faith sector networks. Further work was done to ensure accessibility including promotion through the network of LCD screens in Council facilities, which further explained the context behind the budget process and provided information on how to complete the questionnaire.

2.3 Within the consultation documents, residents were provided with an explanation of what each change theme meant in practice – and what future plans and projects would be delivered in the coming years. They were then provided the opportunity to comment on those proposals and give an indication on whether they were appropriate and if they would suggest any changes.

2.4 Residents were then provided with the specific, immediate budget proposal put forward by the Chief Executive. Residents were provided with

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an explanation of the impact of the option and the associated saving and requested to indicate if they supported the implementation of the option.

3.0 WE CONSULTED ON THE FOLLOWING FUTURE PLANS

3.1 In relation to 'Customer Contact', residents were provided the following explanation of the change theme on which they were requested to provide feedback and comments.

"We have to be serious about moving our customers away from expensive ways of contacting us – targeting those who need face to face support. 'Customer Contact' means, basically, all of the different ways residents contact the Council or access services – either over the phone, online, through letters or emails or face to face at one of our hundreds of buildings. This work will conduct a thorough review of all those access channels, and make sure they are as cost effective and targeted as possible.

We will focus on moving as many services as possible entirely online – removing back office administrative costs, and making processes much easier for customers to complete. The Council also spends millions every year on various forms of information, advice and guidance – both directly providing it and also through contracts. We will again review all of this spend to make sure that we are getting the best value for money possible.

Wirral Council operates more libraries and One Stop Shops than any other borough in the region. We also have a fully integrated call centre, many buildings with reception desks, a website, social media channels and hundreds of phone numbers and email addresses which people use to access services and contact the Council.

Clearly, this is hugely expensive to maintain. Over the next twelve months we will implement a new customer access strategy – applying a strategic, whole-Council approach to how resources are invested in dealing with residents who contact us and access our services. This will completely remodel our approach to our call centre, how our website is used, our library operations and our one stop shops. We will also, over the next few months, implement an appointments system at many one stop shops – making the services more efficient, less costly and hugely reducing waiting times for customers."

4.0 FEEDBACK RECEIVED

4.1 Feedback received on the broad approach outlined in this area was relatively supportive and concerns were generally focussed on two main themes; internet access and service quality.

4.2 Responses were keen to see the Council implement more online access channels for services to ensure they were easier to access and find out about. However, many people expressed a concern that certain elements

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of Wirral communities will be unable to access or operate online channels – responses therefore sought some assurance that implementing online access would not completely remove telephone or face to face access.

- 4.3 Responses were also keen to see the Council invest in new technologies in delivering services but, similarly, were concerned that any such investment seeks to improve the quality and accessibility of a service as well as making it more efficient and cheaper to operate.

5.0 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BUDGET PROPOSALS

- 5.1 Residents were then provided with the budget proposal from the Chief Executive in this area to comment on. This proposal is provided below together with the public feedback which has been received.

Option: Community Libraries

15/16	16/17	TOTAL
£000s	£000s	£000s
411	-	411

Wirral is now one of the only Councils in the North West to not close any libraries. We believe this is the right decision as libraries play a hugely important role in any community. However, maintaining 24 libraries in their current form in a borough as small as Wirral is clearly not possible in the current financial climate. This option would see our smaller, less well used libraries, 15 in total; reduce their opening hours to 2 days per week, 10am-4pm. This option would NOT affect central libraries or libraries with One Stop Shop facilities included.

These hours would be implemented on an alternate basis – so that on any given day, at least one library in a constituency area would be open. This option brings the benefit of major savings, while at the same time keeping all 24 of Wirral's libraries in operation. It also gives us the opportunity to actively seek community involvement to potentially increase the libraries opening times and use in the future – rather than closing the facilities permanently.

Analysis confirms customer demand across these sites currently peaks during 10am – 12pm and 2pm – 4pm with significantly fewer people using the libraries outside of these periods. It is anticipated that staying open at lunchtimes will encourage more use across a proposed 4 hour day.

Wirral libraries have approximately 52,000 active borrowers (average for local population) and process approximately 1,500,000 customer transactions (above average) per year. Other services such as public access IT facilities are also well-used (approximately 215,000 hours per year), especially in comparison with other local authorities across the country.

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Reducing opening hours in community libraries would obviously restrict this provision to certain times, though access would still be available from core libraries. Access via the website, call centre or home reader is unaffected by these proposals. Analysis confirms the current opening hours and number of sites is excessive when compared to actual demand and other councils. The trend over the last 5 years has also shown a reduction in the number of library visits.

Public Feedback

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly agree	15.6%	868
Agree	38.3%	2131
Neither agree nor disagree	10.2%	570
Disagree	11.4%	636
Strongly disagree	24.4%	1359

A number of petitions were received in relation to this option, as well as letters and emails to the Chief Executive from residents and the Friends of Libraries' groups from libraries such as Pensby, Irby, Greasby and Upton among others. Petitions are referenced in the substantive report. A submission was also received from pupils at Hayfield Primary School, opposing the proposal to reduce opening hours at Upton Library in particular.