

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-036-2019/20
Date of meeting: 26 March 2020



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Strategic Projects – Cllr Lion
Subject: Christmas/New Year Arrangements
Responsible Officer: Paula Maginnis (01992 564536)
Democratic Services: Adrian Hendry (01992 56 4246)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) To agree the Leadership Team's recommendation to continue the current Christmas/New Year arrangements for 2020 - 2022, in accordance with the Schedule at appendix 1.**
- (2) That, subject to recommendation (1), a review of service provision across the Council is undertaken in 2021.**

Executive Summary:

For the past 18 years the Council has closed a number of Council buildings during the Christmas and New Year period. The closure of buildings is facilitated by fixing the 2 statutory days, account for the bank holidays and, where necessary, the Council giving an additional day(s).

However, Council services continue to be provided during this period using a range of methods for our residents to contact us. The Council operates a website whereby our residents can access a range of information, they can request and pay for services and they can report issues within the district. In addition, an out-of-hours service is in place so that residents can speak to a individual to report an emergency issue. Outside of the Public/Bank Holidays our waste team is at work as are our Scheme Managers and North Weald Airfield (NWA).

Consultation has taken place with Service Managers and Leadership Team about the impact of these Christmas/New Year arrangements on service provision to determine whether this has a detrimental impact on service users. Service Managers, supported by the Leadership Team, were of the view that because of the continuing lower demand for services over this period, the most efficient way to meet this demand is by signposting the public to services rather than opening the Council offices. All essential services are covered either by the out of hours contact centre or specific staff on call over the period. Leadership Team support the continuation of the arrangements for the next 2 years.

It is noted that the refurbishment of the main Civic Offices will have just completed in December 2020, During 2021 there are likely to be additional services provided from this building and it is proposed that a review takes place, (informed by Customer Survey, to be carried out in the coming months), to assess customer requirements regarding service provision including opening times throughout the year, including the Christmas/New Year period.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

There are a range of ways our residents can access Council services which do not require our buildings to be open; including our Website (for Council messages/information, reporting issues, payments, applications for services etc), our out of hours contact centre, and customer telephone messages.

Previous consultation with employees showed that 97% of respondents wished the arrangements for the Council over the Christmas/New Year period continued. The report recognises the strong support of staff and Leadership Team regarding the current arrangements for the Christmas/New Year period.

Other Options for Action:

The Cabinet could substitute other arrangements or decide not to continue with the current arrangements.

Report

Background

1. Since 2002 the Council has closed Council buildings over the Christmas and New Year period. The current arrangements make use of the 2 statutory days, bank holidays and, when necessary, 'special leave' days to facilitate the building closure.
2. Employees are entitled to 2 statutory days each year which with the agreement of both the Council and staff have been fixed at Christmas/New Year to facilitate the closure of offices (as opposed to having it in their leave to take at any time). Members have previously agreed that additional 'special leave day(s)' would be given to facilitate the arrangements.
3. Furthermore, Leadership Team recognised that as the Council adopts flexible working practices and maximises the use of technology (both for staff and the public), access to Council services will continue to evolve over the coming years.

Customer

4. Leadership Team support the continuation of the arrangements on the following basis;
 - Arrangements with a contractor for out of hours cover allow the Council to continue to be contactable over a range of frontline services during this period (this was previously Mears, a new provider will be procured in 2020);
 - Experience has demonstrated that effective on-call arrangements are able to be put in place over the Christmas/New Year period covering a range of services, Neighbourhoods, Homelessness, flood/drainage etc
 - Electronic services operated by the Council are available, including on-line payments, reporting issues and information;
 - Cover arrangements for monitoring social media enquiries and for updating the website remotely have been working successfully for a number of years.
 - It is preferable to have staff absent at this much less busy time of the year, than at other times when greater public contact is required
5. From previous reports members will be aware that there are a number of services available to the public during this period and previously the Mears Contact Centre took out-of-hours calls on behalf of the Council, both for routine housing repairs calls and general emergency calls to the

switchboard number. A new contractor will be in place once the Mears contract comes to an end later this year.

6. During the Christmas/New Year period 2019/20, from the afternoon of the 24 December to 1 January 2020 (inclusive) the Council had a total of 168 calls 90% of these were for housing repairs issues which were managed through the out of hours arrangements already in place and our own staff. The other 10% of calls reported ranged from noise complaints, homelessness and highways.
7. Only 1% of employees (5 comments) reported in the 2018 survey that they had received an adverse comment from the public. Two of these respondents did not wish the arrangements to continue.
8. Of the respondents to the public consultation in 2014, 99.8% said they had not been inconvenienced by not being able to access a Council service during this period.
9. Members have been clear with officers that a range of services should be contactable during this period as follows;
 - Housing Repairs
 - Housing Options
 - Waste, recycling and other environmental services
 - Benefits/Council Tax/Rent
10. It is worth noting that the Council's website and telephone messages signpost the public to report environmental issues on-line and to call our out of hours contact centre for routine housing repairs and for all emergencies. The website can be used by the public for on-line reporting, payments and information for Council Tax and Benefits.
11. One observation following Christmas/New Year 2019/20 is that it would be helpful to have a named senior lead officer nominated for every day from Christmas Eve to the first normal working day who would coordinate Cabinet member requests and concerns and/or certain emergency support. This would also improve the Council's Business Continuity arrangements during this period.
12. Our residents will be consulted on the future of our Customer Strategy and our service provision throughout the year including weekends and the Christmas/New Year period, which will inform our future arrangements

Staff

13. Leadership Team support the continuation of the arrangements on the following basis;
 - Very strong support expressed in a previous staff survey and the positive effect on staff morale;
 - Staff are currently dealing with a significant amount of change and the wish is that staff continue to be engaged with this, maintaining the momentum.
 - Structural works are to begin at the Civic Offices in the summer of 2020 and the disruption to employees will be substantial. It is therefore important to staff morale that the arrangements continue.
 - Many private and public organisations the Council deals with are closed over the Christmas/New Year period
 - There are wellbeing benefits of ensuring that staff have an uninterrupted Christmas break.
14. The proposed schedule is attached at Appendix 1.

Service Provision Review

15. Following the refurbishment of the main Civic Offices building it is intended to have additional services provided from the building. These plans along with the outcome of this year's customer survey will provide data for a Council wide service provision review. The review will look at proposals for week and weekend opening times and the working arrangements over the Christmas and New Year period.

Consultation

16. Consultation took place with staff in 2003, 2006, 2013, 2018 and a short survey was distributed to Service Managers in 2020. In 2013, 395 employees responded to the survey and 94% wished the arrangements to continue. In 2018, 525 employees responded and 97% would like the arrangements to continue – representing an increased response rate and an even greater level of support. The results of the 2020 consultation with Service Managers is attached at Appendix 2.

Resource Implications:

There are no additional resource implications to the Council.

Legal and Governance Implications:

Statutory, emergency and critical services will be available to our residents, via call-out and out of hour arrangements and the Council's website.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

N/A

Consultation Undertaken:

Consultation has been undertaken with Service Managers and the Leadership Team. Previously consultation has been carried out with employees, residents and members.

Background Papers:

None

Risk Management:

The Council is not closed during this period and the public can still access a range of services, emergency or otherwise. Scheme Managers make visits to residents over this period, North Weald Airfield is open on the non-Bank Holidays. In addition, the Waste Management Officers provide a regular service on the non-Bank Holidays.

Out-of-hours calls to the main switchboard number are answered by Mears, with the majority of calls being for housing repairs. Arrangements are in place to call out Council staff and/or contractors to deal with issues if required.

During 2020 a new out-of-hours contract will be procured, to start following the end of the current contract.

Equality Impact Assessment

As attached