

Report to the Board

15 January 2015



Title: Wrekenton Housing Office relocation

Report of: Director of Customers and Communities

Purpose of Report

1. To advise the Board on the relocation of the housing management service to a purpose designed building in Wrekenton working alongside other services.

Background

2. The Board received a report on 16 March 2014 advising of the Council's review of all of its assets and of Council services provided within the Wrekenton area. The outcome of the Wrekenton review was a proposal to co-locate services in a new service hub in the Wrekenton Community Centre.
3. The Wrekenton housing office is the only housing company service point which is not currently co-located with council services. All other housing offices are located with library or children services and benefit from improved joint working relationships and customer services.
4. Whilst the main alterations to the Community Centre have now been completed, work on the internal fittings is now underway.
5. The following services have confirmed that they will be operating from the new hub and discussions are underway with the Police to also be based within the hub.
 - Community facilities
 - Access to financial and advice services and health initiatives
 - Library Services
 - Youth and Children's Services
 - The Base
 - Community Education and Adult and Family Learning
 - TGHC Housing Management Services

The Wrekenton hub

6. The Council are consulting the public on a review of the libraries service and how it may be provided in the future. The outcomes of the review will be reported to

Cabinet on 24 February 2015, along with recommendations for the future provision of library services across Gateshead.

7. As there may be implications from this review for the Wrekenton Hub, the opening has been delayed until the end of March, when the outcome will be known. This will allow us to work longer with customers, particularly around alternative payment options.

The future Housing service

8. The current housing service will close on 27 March 2015 and will reopen in the new hub on 30 March 2015. There will be no disruption to services which will continue to operate as normal during the relocation.
9. In line with the Council's Customer Contact strategy, there will be no payment counter within the new hub. There are a range of other payment options available within the area to enable residents to pay rent and council tax, including pay points and the Post Office. In addition, a number of self service options are available on-line and over the telephone, enabling payments to be made 24/7. A list of paypoint and post office locations is attached at Appendix 1.

Consultation with Customers and Stakeholders

10. We wrote to all 3,649 customers in October 2014 advising of the closure and drop in sessions were held so they could give their views. During the period of 16 October to 19 December 2014, we surveyed customers visiting the Wrekenton Office on the proposals and asked them how they would make their payments in the future. We continue to capture further views from customers at the office on payments and access to services.
11. The results of the consultation are attached at appendix 2. 10% (366) were surveyed and gave their views. In summary :-
 - 79% of visiting customers access the office to make a payment
 - 60% of those who responded said they would use a Post Office or Pay Point as an alternative method of payment
 - 28% would use direct debit or standing order and
 - 8% would pay on line or over the phone
 - No objections were received to the proposals
12. As part of the consultation customer's concerns were logged and have helped inform the future housing service. In response we will
 - Continue to promote the alternative ways to make a payment and obtain a rent balance.
 - Provide location details of where payments can be made.
 - Provide details on how customers can continue to access housing services at the new Wrekenton Hub.
 - Maintain links with local partnerships and community groups.

Links to Values

13. This report relates to the following company values:

- Being honest, accountable and transparent
- Being customer focused, innovative and professional
- Being caring and respecting
- Embracing equality

Impact on tenants and leaseholders

14. 3,649 homes are managed in the Wrekenton area, with over 1,112 cash transactions taken weekly, of which 747 are rent payment. Upon closure of the housing office tenants will access services in a range of ways through the Wrekenton hub or at any other housing office.

Risk Management Implications

15. There are no direct risks arising from this report.

Financial Implications

16. There are no direct costs arising from this report but any costs around the relocation of the service will be met from existing budgets. Any implications to staffing will be the subject of a report to Resources committee on 24 February 2015.

Equality and Diversity Implications

17. We will work with all customers to ensure they are able to access services they need.
18. An equality impact assessment is being carried out as part of the review to understand the potential impact on different groups of relocating the office and any actions needed to mitigate this where possible. This will be included with a further progress report to Customers and Communities committee on the proposals.

Value for Money implications

19. The relocation of the office will enable us to review the housing services to ensure an effective service continues to be provided that meets the needs of the customers.
20. As there will be no cash counter in the hub, there will be a VFM saving around the cost of transactions. Currently to make a payment at a cash counter the cost per transaction is £2.29, which is significantly higher than other methods such as Direct Debit (34p), Post Office (49p), Paypoint (44p) Internet and touchtone (20p).

Consultation

21. The ward councillors for High Fell, Lamesley, Chowdene and Low Fell were consulted throughout the development of the hub proposals and support the co-location of services. In addition meetings have been held with local residents groups to seek their views and in the main there was general agreement to the proposals. Their main concern was around finding temporary accommodation whilst the works were undertaken.

22. Consultation will be undertaken with the existing customers and stakeholders to ensure that they are able to access services following the relocation to the Wrekenton Hub.
23. Consultation with the Councils Financial Services Team will be undertaken regarding the closure of the payment counter. Actions to minimise the impact on both rent and council tax income will be implemented to maximise revenue collection.
24. The Trade Unions have been updated on the proposals to relocate the Wrekenton Housing office and on the implications of the integrated model of working on 17 December 2014. They have raised no objections to the proposals.

Recommendations

25. The Board is asked to:
 - note the relocation of the housing service to the Wrekenton hub;
 - recommend that following consultation a further report on the proposals and implications for employees be provided to Resources Committee.

Payment options – in and around Low Fell, Springwell and Wrekenton

In and around Low Fell

Paypoint locations

- A Sockett and Son – 578 Durham Road, Gateshead NE9 6HX
- C & S – 3 Boxlaw, Gateshead, NE9 6ST
- Carr Hill News – 80 Potters Way, Gateshead NE9 5QH
- Charnwood Wine Store – 2 Charnwood Gardens, Sheriff Hill, Gateshead NE9 5SB
- Co-op Allerdene – 1-3 Trafford Road, Gateshead NE9 6NF
- Co-op United – 64 Beacon Lough Road, Gateshead NE9 6TA
- Finlays Newsagents – 117 Southend Road, Gateshead NE9 6XS
- J and B News – 212 Durham Road, Gateshead NE8 4JR
- Nisa Local – 26-28 Sheriffs Highway, Gateshead NE9 5UE
- Sanghera News – 40 Sheriffs Highway, Gateshead NE9 5UE
- Wetheral Stores – 23 Wetheral Gardens, Gateshead NE9 6PY

Post Office branches

- Low Fell – 439-443 Durham Road, Low Fell, Gateshead NE9 5EX
- Lyndhurst – 29 Wetheral Gardens, Gateshead NE9 6PY

In and around Springwell

Paypoint locations

- C & S – 3 Boxlaw, Gateshead NE9 6ST
- Co-op Fewster Square – Fewster Square, Gateshead NE10 8XQ
- Co-op North East – Ravensworth Villas, Gateshead NE9 7JP
- Lifestyle Express – 51 Lecondale, Leam Lane, Gateshead NE10 8RA
- Martins – 8 Fewster Square, Gateshead NE10 8XQ
- Nisa Stores – 161 High Street, Wrekenton, Gateshead, NE9 7JR

Post Office branches

- Aycliffe Avenue – 47 Aycliffe Avenue, Gateshead NE9 7BX
- Beacon Lough – 10 Boxlaw, Gateshead NE9 6ST

In and around Wrekenton

Paypoint locations

- C & S – 3 Boxlaw, Gateshead NE9 6ST
- Co-op Allerdene – 1-3 Trafford Road, Gateshead NE9 6NF
- Co-op Beacon Lough – 64 Beacon Lough Road, Gateshead NE9 6TA
- Co-op Wrekenton – Ravensworth Villas, Gateshead NE9 7JP
- Finlays Newsagents – 117 Southend Road, Gateshead NE9 6XS
- Nisa Stores – 161 High Street, Wrekenton, Gateshead NE9 7JR
- Wetheral Stores – 23 Wetheral Gardens, Gateshead NE9 6PY

Post Office branches

- Aycliffe Avenue – 47 Aycliffe Avenue, Gateshead NE9 7BX
- Beacon Lough – 10 Boxlaw, Beacon Lough, Gateshead NE9 6ST
- High Street – 307 High Street, Gateshead NE8 1EQ
- Lyndhurst – 29 Wetheral Gardens, Gateshead NE9 6PY
- Wrekenton – 175 High Street, Wrekenton, Gateshead NE9 7JR

**Wrekenton Consultation for the period of 16 October 2014 to
– 18 December 2014**

We have written to **all 3,649** Wrekenton customers to advise them of the office relocation in September 2014 and invited them to attend various drop in sessions to discuss any concerns

We have also now personally talked to over **366 (10%)** of Wrekenton customers and no objection to the relocation has been received to date.

Of the customers that were asked about the reasons they visit the housing office:

- **79%** of customers visit to make a payment

The 366 customers surveyed:

- **263** customers pay rent**
- **247** customers pay council tax**
- **198** to use the free phone**
- **275** seek general housing advice**

**note some customers visit the housing office for more than one of the above reasons

Of the customers asked about alternative methods of payment following the relocation:

- **60%** of the customers said they would use a Post Office or Pay Point as an alternative way of making payments
- **28%** of customers said they would pay by Direct Debit or Standing Order
- **8%** would pay by phone or online.
- **4%** were undecided.

Five drop in sessions were held for customers including one at the sheltered scheme, Angel Court

- **5** customers attended these sessions

Wrekenton Relocation – Feedback and Responses from Customers up to 18 December 2014

Worries or Concerns	Anything else customer commented on/ highlighted	Our Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Awkward for older people ● Inconvenient to have no payment counter at new office. ● I will miss this office for paying bills. ● Not very happy about the payment counter closing as it will be very inconvenient. ● Only comes to Wrekenton to pay rent/ council tax. ● Very confused about paying rent at other places. ● Visit Wrekenton just to pay rent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● It's a shame its closing, will hit a few people as its been there a long time. There are people who have always paid their rent/council tax here. ● Please don't close rent payment counter. ● The payment counter will be missed. ● Will be sad to see go as location is convenient it's a focal point for council services and staff are very friendly ● Would prefer to make payments for rent & Council tax at another office. ● Would prefer to still come into office to pay rent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● All customers were provided with details of alternatives ways to pay rent and more specifically Post Office and Pay Point locations in and around the Wrekenton and Low Fell area. ● Those residents surveyed who didn't have either a rent or council tax payment card have been ordered one to enable them to pay at the Post Office and Pay Point. Those indicating Direct Debit as a preference were given a direct debit form. ● All customers advised that although office relocating it is close by where they can access housing services other than paying rent – although they will be able to pay over the free phone or on line at the library who will be co-locating with TGHC

In response to customer's concerns and questions we will continue to promote the alternative ways to make a payments and reassure customers how they can continue to access housing services