



## Report to the Board

26 November 2015

**Title:** Dunston Activity Centre

**Report of:** Director of Customers and Communities

### Purpose of Report

1. To update Board on closure of the payment counter at Dunston Activity Centre following the Council's decision to declare the Dunston Activity Centre as surplus and to approve a community asset transfer of the building to the Dunston Family Churches.

### Background

2. Board received an update on the proposals for the closure of the payment counter at Dunston Activity Centre at its meeting on 17 September 2015.
3. On 15 September 2015, Cabinet approved the disposal of the Dunston Activity Centre to Dunston Family Church. As part of the decision Cabinet approved the closure of the payment counter.
4. The Council have entered into a tenancy at will with the Dunston Family Church from 2 November 2015 for the use of Dunston Activity Centre and are currently working towards the community asset transfer.
5. Cabinet have been informed that the closure of the payment counter services at DAC will be the subject of a report to the Housing Company Board.

### Dunston Activity Centre (DAC)

6. TGHC currently operates a payment counter service and also provides housing management services from office space within the property.
7. There are a range of other payment options available including options in Dunston and the wider neighbourhood that enables residents to pay rent and council tax. In addition a number of self service options are available on-line and over the telephone, enabling payments to be made 24/7.
8. DAC takes the least number of payments of all the housing offices. Of the 3,642 tenancies in the Inner West neighbourhood, only 28.42% of tenants paid their rent at a payment counter in 2014/15, with only 14% of these paying at DAC. Effectively 71.58% of Inner West tenants are paying their rent through a range of other ways.

9. In addition business monitoring by the housing team demonstrates that there is a low footfall of customers visiting the housing service in the Centre. Customers contact the service mainly by telephone. Of those customers who do visit the office, the majority do so as a result of pre-arranged appointments

### **Payment counter proposals**

10. Since the 15 September Cabinet report we have been working with customers and ward members to raise awareness of the changes to the payment counter service.
11. In consultation with the Council and Dunston Family Churches we have agreed to close the payment counter from 23 December 2015.
12. In summary we have:
- Liaised with all ward members on the closure of the payment counter
  - During the week commencing 9 November, we notified all 3642 tenants who are managed by the Inner West team of the closure of the cash counter in December and provided details on the alternative ways to pay their rent.
  - Organised a series of drop in sessions during November at DAC to inform customers of the payment counter closure and discuss any queries they have about accessing services in the future.
  - Provided updates to all customers who currently use DAC to make payments on the alternative ways to pay. This activity will enable us to work with customers on how they can access payment services in the future.

### **Links to Values**

13. This report relates to the Company values of being: -
- Customer focused
  - Open and honest
  - Accountable
  - Inclusive, valuing diversity
  - Passionate about what we do.

### **Impact on tenants and leaseholders**

14. 3642 homes are managed in the Inner West neighbourhood, with an average of 250 transactions taken weekly for rent payments. Upon closure of the payment counter, tenants will be able to pay their rent in a range of ways, whilst they can continue to access other housing services through the Dunston Activity Centre, online or at any other housing office.

### **Risk Management Implications**

15. There is the risk of a reduction in rental income; however we will be working with customers to raise awareness of the alternative ways to pay their rent. Currently less than 14% of the Inner West tenants regularly make a rent payment at the DAC payment counter.

## **Financial Implications**

16. There are no direct costs arising from this report but any future running and overhead costs will be subject to further discussions with the Council and Dunston Family Churches.

## **Equality and Diversity Implications**

17. We will work with all customers to ensure they are able to access services they need. The outcome of the discussions will be subject to a further report to Customers and Communities committee.

## **Value for Money implications**

18. The cost of paying rent at a payment counter is significantly higher than other methods such as Direct Debit, Post Office, Paypoint, Internet and touchtone.

## **Consultation**

19. The Portfolio Holder for Housing and ward councillors for Dunston and Teams; Dunston Hill and Whickham East; Bridges; Whickham South and Sunnyside and Whickham North have been consulted on the transfer of DAC and proposals to close the payment counter from 23 December 2015.
20. Ward Councillors raised no concerns and were happy with our approach to work with customers over the coming months on how to access services and alternative ways to pay rent.
21. As outlined in paragraph 13, we will continue to engage with customers and stakeholders over the coming months to ensure that they are able to access payment and other customer services.
22. Consultation with the Councils Financial Services Team has been 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
23. The housing company employees working in Dunston and the trade unions have been updated on the proposals to close the payment counter. Any implications for employees will be the subject of further discussions with the trade unions.

## **Recommendations**

24. The Board is asked to:
  - note the closure of the payment counter at Dunston Activity Centre from 23 December 2015;
  - note that any employee implications would be the subject of further discussions with the trade unions and a separate report to Resources committee.