



Report to Customers and Communities Committee

11 February 2016

Title: Evaluation of Wrekenton Hub

Report of: Director of Customers and Communities

Purpose of Report

1. To update Committee on the integrated customer service delivery model provided from the Wrekenton Hub.

Background

2. The Board received a report on 16 March 2014 to approve the relocation of the housing management service at Wrekenton and to work alongside other services at the purpose designed building, Wrekenton Hub which opened on 30 March 2015.
3. In line with the Council's customer contact strategy, the opportunity was taken to close the payment counter when Wrekenton office relocated to the Hub. There is a range of alternative payment options available to customers to pay rent, council tax and other council bills
4. In order to deliver a more joined up approach and to support budget savings to the Library service, an integrated customer service model was developed with the Library Service. A service level agreement was set up which outlines the roles and responsibilities that both the company and libraries undertake.
5. A vacancy for an HMA was advertised and ring fenced to the library assistants. This was an essential appointment that has supported and mentored other HMAs to deliver the library services, whilst increasing their own skills and knowledge around housing services.
6. The new library opened at Wrekenton in July 2015

Customer Service Activity

7. Business monitoring has been undertaken over the last six months (July to December 2015) to assess the impact of the new integrated service. The business activity key headlines are as follows:

- Since relocating to the Hub, the number of customers visiting TGHC for housing management services has significantly reduced from 1280 (per month at the Wrekenton office) to 364 customers per month (at the Hub).
- More customers are now contacting us by telephone rather than visiting the Hub, 60% of customers contacts are by phone and 40% are in person, compared to previously 30% by phone and 70% in person at the office .
- The TGHC Freephone at the Hub continues to be well used , with 983 calls each month.
- The number of Wrekenton customers paying housing rent at a council payment counter has significantly reduced by half (now 21%) , while 79% of the customers pay by either direct debit, standing order, post office, pay point or online.
- The new library at the Hub has seen an average of 530 visitors a month (which is 59% of all visitors to the hub).
- There was an increase of 9 (13%) new memberships in 2015 (80 in total in 2015 compared to 71 in the same period for 2014).
- Customers are using the new library PCs an average of 23% of the available time (Compared to 27% in 2014).
- Whilst book issues are down from last year, they are now increasing month on month rising from 658 book issues in September to 930 in December which is a 41% increase.

Update of the integrated model of service

8. The new model of service is working well and so far is achieving the outcomes expected in terms of providing an integrated customer service and sustainable library services. This is being monitored through cross service meetings.
9. Front line employees are dealing with housing, library or council related enquiries at the first point of contact through one reception. Customers can also be signposted to TGHC free phone or onto other agencies.
10. A full programme of library service training, shadowing and mentoring has been provided for TGHC employees to enable them to deliver the library service and the new ways of working are embedded and have been received well by employees.
11. The majority of tenants are paying their rent by alternative methods and the closure of the payment counter has not had any obvious impact in terms of rent arrears and council tax. Although there has been an increase in customer footfall at the Civic Centre and Leam Lane payment counters, overall more customers are choosing to pay by other means.
12. The number of TGHC customers visiting the office significantly reduced since we closed the payment counter and relocated services to the Hub. 60% of our customers prefer to contact us by phone compared to 40% of customers visiting us in person.
13. Library computer use has slightly declined. Joint working with the library service is being considered to promote digital inclusion and visiting customers will be encouraged to use the library computers to access online services.

14. The reduction in the number of book issues may be attributed to the smaller library and the change in location. Improved marketing will hopefully improve the number of library visitors and membership.
15. Rhyme Time sessions at the library are now well attended which provides opportunities to broaden the library's customer base. In addition Larkspur, Felldyke and St Oswald's schools have attended introductory sessions at the library.
16. A survey was carried out with customers who visited the Hub and the feedback is very positive. 98% of customers rated the customer service they received as either very good or good and 100% of customers rated their overall experience as either very good or good. The results are attached at the Appendix.

Review of the HMA job profile

17. Currently the role of the Housing Management Assistant (HMA) has a strong emphasis on the cash collection function however as the number of payment counters reduce over time new models of service delivery such as the provision at Wrekenton are emerging.
18. Given these emerging models of service delivery there was an opportunity to review the HMA job profile to modernise and reflect the new ways of working. This review will ensure that as we develop our approach to customer service in partnership with the Council we can continue to provide customer focused services.
19. The outcome of the HMA review will be the subject of a report to the Resources Committee in February 2016.

Links to Values

20. This report relates to the following company values:
 - Customer focused
 - Accountable
 - Inclusive, valuing diversity
 - Passionate about what we do

Impact on tenants and leaseholders

21. Over 3600 council homes are managed by the Wrekenton Housing team, and over 79% are now paying their rent by alternative methods. 60% of our customer contact is now by telephone or online compared to 30% in 2014 and 40% of customers visit in person compared to 70% in 2014.
22. The new library service has seen a 30% increase in membership since moving to the hub, making it more sustainable for the future.

Risk Management Implications

23. The service level agreement to support the development of the integrated customer service model will mitigate the risks associated with the delivery of this project. Business monitoring will continue to assess the ongoing impacts.

Financial Implications

24. Since relocating to the new Hub there has been a reduction in running costs of £6,700 over the nine month period since April 2015.

Equality and Diversity Implications

25. We continue to work with all customers to ensure they are able to access services they need.

Value for Money implications

26. The relocation to the Wrekenton Hub and the development of an integrated customer service model offers opportunities for the delivery of value for money services aimed at meeting the needs of customers.
27. Following the closure of the payment counter at Wrekenton there are savings in relation to the cost of payment 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 telephone (20p).

Consultation

28. The trade unions and employees were fully involved in the development of the integrated service delivery model and are positive and supportive of the new ways of working.
29. A survey has been carried out with customers visiting the Hub, to obtain feedback on the customer service received at the Hub, the results of which are attached at the Appendix.

Recommendations

30. The Committee is asked to:
 - (i) Note the report for information
 - (ii) Comment on the customer service activity and advise if it is satisfied with progress made to date
 - (iii) Note that the review of the HMA role will be subject to a report to Resources Committee in February 2016

**Wrekenton Hub
Customer Feedback January 2016**

Do you find the reception area welcoming?

Yes 93%

How did you rate the customer service you received?

Very Good or Good 98%

If you visited to use the Freephone, was it to contact a TGHC or Gateshead Council service?

TGHC 72%

Council 28%

Was your enquiry dealt with satisfactorily?

Yes 82%

No 18% * (main comments were time taken to report a repair on Freephone)

Overall – how would you rate your experience today?

Very Good or Good 100%