

Report to: **Hub Committee**
Date: **16 July 2019**
Title: **Northern Outreach**
Portfolio Area: **Customer First**
Wards Affected: **All**
Urgent Decision: **N** Approval and clearance obtained: **Y**
Date next steps can be taken: **After call in period 24 July 2019**

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RECOMMENDATION

That the Hub Committee approves the proposed future of the Northern Outreach Service as detailed in paragraph 5 of this report.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to consider usage of the Northern Outreach Service and how best to offer Council services in the future.
- 1.2 The report highlights that use of the Northern Outreach Service is extremely low with 41 customers using the service over a 3 month period - an average of 3 customers per week. Usage has declined by 80% when compared with the average daily usage for the same period last year.
- 1.3 Delivery of an outreach service at the Ockment Centre is costly and takes a disproportionate amount of officer time i.e. 20% of their working week to provide support to approximately 0.07% of West Devon residents.
- 1.4 Data for Kilworthy Park Reception at the Council's office in Tavistock also shows that very few West Devon residents use it as a facility.

2. Background

- 2.1 Based on evidence collated by both Members and officers, the Hub Committee on 19 March 2019 recommended to the Council that its preferred option for the Northern Outreach Service was to reduce the service to a single day per week and monitored for a three month period and a report presented back to the Hub Committee meeting on 16 July 2019 that include the results of the monitoring, along with results of the monitoring at Tavistock to enable a decision on the future provision of the service.
- 2.2 The Northern Outreach service came about due to the closure of the Council's St James Street office. Outreach was formerly provided twice weekly but due to low usage figures and in turn the relative high cost of delivery, the service was reduced to a weekly service as of April this year.
- 2.3 At present Northern Outreach is provided by the Council's Locality Engagement Officer on a weekly basis, on a Wednesday, at the Ockment Centre in Okehampton.
- 2.4 When the Northern Outreach service was first introduced the Council had two Locality Engagement Officers, it now only has one. As well as providing the Northern Outreach service the officer provides support to 31 elected Members compared to 15 Members in previous years.

3. Outcomes/outputs

- 3.1 As requested by this Committee, in March of this year, monitoring has been put in place to assess usage of both the Northern Outreach and the Council's reception facility in Tavistock. Findings from the research can be found in appendices A and B of this report. Key findings are also summarised in the paragraphs below.
- 3.2 The table below shows there were 41 users of the Northern Outreach service from April to June 2019, compared to 191 users for the same period in 2018. This equates to approximately 80% decline in use.

	April-June 2018	April-June 2019
Number of residents using the Northern Outreach Service	191	41

*The outreach operated for 2 days a week in 2018 and only 1 day a week in 2019. For the purposes of a statistically sound comparison an average daily use for 2018 has been used.

- 3.3 The significant decline in use of the Northern Outreach service can be attributed to a decrease in demand for recycling boxes. During 2018 the Council introduced its Box Clever scheme, many of the 191 users detailed above chose to visit the Northern Outreach service to collect recycling boxes. However, the new Waste and Recycling contract, which commenced in April of this year, puts the onus on the contractor to deliver all waste and recycling containers, thus negating the need for residents to collect boxes.

- 3.4 The Locality Engagement Officer has advised queries presented at the Northern Outreach Service could readily be resolved by customers online or via the phone. However, 76% of users over the past three months didn't try calling the Council and 63% didn't try looking online. Unfortunately, in the very rare instance when the Locality Engagement officer has been presented with a complex query, they have been unable to resolve it at the first point of contact. This is because the officer lacks the detailed specialist knowledge required. The officer has therefore referred the customer to a specialist colleague to give advice over the phone.
- 3.5 The data in appendices A and B show a high percentage of users of the Northern Outreach and the Tavistock Reception facility live in the town the service is provided in, with users often stating it was convenient to use the service as they were passing. However, 70% of West Devon residents do not have a face to face presence where they live. It could therefore be argued the Council is offering a service that is only of benefit to the minority of the residents it serves.

4. Options available and consideration of risk

4.1 Increase service

There is no evidence to suggest the Northern Outreach Service should increase. There has been an 80% decline in use of the service. Increasing the service would also place further demands on the Locality Engagement Officer's time and limit their ability to deliver the rest of their duties.

4.2 Maintain service at current level

Office of National Statistics data states the population of West Devon is circa 55,000. The Northern Outreach service has therefore been used by just 0.07 of West Devon residents over the past three months. The annual cost to maintain a service for one day a week in Okehampton is well in excess of £6,000.

4.3 Withdraw service

There has been very poor take up of the Northern Outreach service. Over 70% of its users over the past 3 months stated they would choose to access Council services either online or via the phone in future.

5. Proposed Way Forward

- 5.1 In light of the evidence it is recommended option 4.3 is pursued and the outreach service at the Ockment Centre in withdrawn as of 31 July 2019. And furthermore that an option appraisal on the future of Tavistock Reception be presented to this Committee in November 2019.
- 5.2 To ensure the withdrawal of the Northern Outreach service has as minimal impact as possible it is recommended the following steps are adopted:

5.3 Clear Communication

All residents, agencies based at the Ockment Centre, Okehampton Library, Okehampton Town Council and Parish Councils are advised of the withdrawal and given clear guidance on how best to contact the Council.

5.4 Vulnerable Customers

It is recognised that some customers simply are not able to engage with the Council online or over the phone. In these instances Mobile Locality Officers are on hand to assist these customers.

5.5 Improved Customer Service

The Council is unrelenting in improving its customer service ensuring it provides easy to use services as well as value for money. In late autumn 2018 the Council embarked on a 12 month Customer Satisfaction Action Plan. The focus of the plan is to ensure the Council delivers right first time services thus negating the need for customers to contact the council to report service failure. The plan to date has resulted in a reduction of 3,000 customer calls. The Council knows that providing access to service online line is convenient for residents and is cost effective. In 12 months, customer transactions on the Council's website have increased by 10,000 online transactions. However, there is still work to do and the Council needs to ensure it adheres to its Customer Satisfaction Plan to make sure this happens. Full information on the Council's Customer Satisfaction Plan can be found in online in the minutes of previous Hub Committee meetings.

6. Implications

Implications	Relevant to proposals Y/N	Details and proposed measures to address
Legal/Governance	Y	There are no direct legal implications to this report. The Hub Committee has a responsibility to provide Leadership to the overall activities of the Council and ensure the services the Council provides are efficient and effective.
Financial implications to include reference to value for money	Y	At present Northern Outreach is provided by the Council's Locality Engagement Officer on a weekly basis, on a Wednesday, at the Ockment Centre in Okehampton. The Northern Outreach Service is not considered the best use of Council resources because it is taking considerable officer time to service a very small cross section of West Devon residents. It therefore presents poor value for money.

Risk	N	Use of the Northern Outreach Service has been closely monitored for 15 months the recommendation to cease the service is therefore grounded in evidence and has been closely considered.
Supporting Corporate Strategy	Y	Council Theme – <i>Efficient and effective</i>
Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications		
Equality and Diversity	Y	N/A
Safeguarding	Y	N/A
Community Safety, Crime and Disorder	Y	N/A
Health, Safety and Wellbeing	Y	N/A
Other implications	N	None.

Supporting Information:

Appendix A

Northern Outreach, Ockment Centre Usage April-June 2019

Appendix B

Tavistock Reception, Kilworthy Park Usage April-June 2019