Tameside & Glossop Strategic Commission
Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) Form

Subject / Title	New Customer Service Centre Delivery Model

Team	**Department**	**Directorate**
Customer Services	Cultural and Customer Services	Operations and Neighbourhoods

Start Date	**Completion Date**
9 April 2021	

Project Lead Officer	Mandy Kinder
Contract / Commissioning Manager	
Assistant Director/ Director	Emma Varnam

EIA Group (lead contact first)	**Job title**	**Service**
Mandy Kinder	Head of Cultural and Customer Services	Cultural and Customer Services
Janine Yates	Team Manager Welfare Rights	Cultural and Customer Services

PART 1 – INITIAL SCREENING

1a.	**What is the project, proposal or service / contract change?**	A review of the Council's face to face Customer Service function.

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1b.	**What are the main aims of the project, proposal or service / contract change?**	To consider the current customer service model and propose a more cost effective and efficient model with the ideal being face to face customer service is only provided to those residents that really need it and those that can self-serve and use other more cost effective channels do so. The new proposed model would remove the 'drop-in' facility at Tameside One for the customer services centre. The current customer services model delivers advice at both Level 1 and Level 2. Customer Services Officers, with a higher level of training, would handle all types of enquiries including those categorised as Level 1 (in-depth housing benefit and council tax enquiries) alongside Level 2 enquires (book, pay, request a service and verification of housing benefit documents). In addition to the offer at Tameside One, all libraries in the Borough also offered Level 2 service to customers, including Ashton library, which is also based in Tameside One on the ground floor. To undertake public consultation on the proposed new model. The principles of the proposed model is as follows: Not to re-open the expensive reactive drop in customer service centre based in Tameside One at Ashton in the previous format retain Level 2 enquiries at all Tameside Libraries promote, encourage and support a digital first model with the expectation that where possible, residents should self-serve utilising the Council website or other technology such as applications where available where this is not possible a supported service offer over the telephone, web chat, email etc to assist customers with their enquiries where more detailed assistance is required e.g. completing a housing benefit application a telephone call back service by appointment would be available face to face appointments only for the most vulnerable to ensure that residents are able to access services and assistance without disadvantage. These will be bookable via telephone

1c. Will the project, proposal or service / contract change have either a direct or indirect impact on, or relevance to, any groups of people with protected equality characteristics? Where there is a direct or indirect impact on, or relevance to, a group of people with protected equality characteristics as a result of the project, proposal or service / contract change please explain why and how that group of people will be affected.

Protected Characteristic	Direct Impact/ Relevance	Indirect Impact /Relevance	Little / No Impact /Relevance	Explanation

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Age	✓			Some older people may be less likely to access services digitally or have the digital skills to do so and be more reliant on face to face assistance. Resident information from the customer services recording system (NI14) shows 59.23% of customers in 2019/20 were aged under 55 with 40.77% over the age of 55. Data has been considered from Tameside Insight on: Older singles, low income; Older singles, moderate income; pensioners on low income and; affluent pensioners. Specifically, for the purpose of the EIA – preferred method of contact when getting in touch with their local authority. Based on the data available, it shows that there is a mix of preferred methods of contact among older people in Tameside. For example, people falling under the 'older singles, low income' category, there is strong preference for face-to-face contact. However, among the other categories there appears to be no strong demand for accessing council services in this way. Other preferred methods are post, and a neutral attitude to telephone contact. UK Government figures estimate that in Jan/Feb 2020, households with one adult 65 years and over have increased by seven percentage points to 80% since 2019.
Disability	✓			Some residents with a disability may struggle to access services both digitally and on the telephone. This may include those who are learning disabled. There would need to be consideration how those with hearing and sight impairments would be able to access services. Resident information from NI14 shows 21.74% of customers in 2019/20 identified as having a disability
Ethnicity		✓		The data we have available suggests that in 2019/20 71.12% of those contacting customer services identified themselves as British, followed by 28.88% identifying as Ethnic Minorities
Sex			✓	This is a universal service to all residents including those within the protected characteristic groups Resident information from NI14 shows

				52.14% of customers are female and 47.86% male
Religion or Belief			✓	This is a universal service to all residents including those within the protected characteristic groups
Sexual Orientation			✓	This is a universal service to all residents including those within the protected characteristic groups
Gender Reassignment			✓	This is a universal service to all residents including those within the protected characteristic groups
Pregnancy & Maternity			✓	This is a universal service to all residents including those within the protected characteristic groups
Marriage & Civil Partnership			✓	This is a universal service to all residents including those within the protected characteristic groups
Other protected groups determined locally by Tameside and Glossop Strategic Commission?				
Group (*please state*)	**Direct Impact/ Relevance**	**Indirect Impact/Relevance**	**Little / No Impact/ Relevance**	**Explanation**
Mental Health	✓			People with a mental health issue may struggle to access services digitally and by telephone and may be more reliant on face to face services.
Carers			✓	This is a universal service to all residents including those within the protected characteristic groups
Military Veterans			✓	This is a universal service to all residents including those within the protected characteristic groups
Breast Feeding			✓	This is a universal service to all residents including those within the protected characteristic groups
Are there any other groups who you feel may be impacted by the project, proposal or service/contract change or which it may have relevance to? (*e.g. vulnerable residents, isolated residents, those who are homeless*)				
Group (*please state*)	**Direct Impact/ Relevance**	**Indirect Impact/Relevance**	**Little / No Impact/ Relevance**	**Explanation**
Low or no income groups	✓			As the majority of the enquiries to customer services are housing benefit/council tax related which affects low income groups

				there may be some impact. This group are potentially less likely to have funds to secure devices/data/telephone credit to contact the council
People whose first language isn't English	✓			Some residents whose first language is not English may struggle to access services digitally and by telephone and may be more reliant on face to face services. Resident information from NI14 in 2019/20 showed 71.12% of customers identifying as British with 28.88% identifying as Ethnic Minorities

"Low or no income groups" should be included as a key consideration when assessing the impact of your project, proposal, policy or service/contract change.
Wherever a direct or indirect impact or relevance has been identified you should consider undertaking a full EIA or be able to adequately explain your reasoning for not doing so. Where little / no impact or relevance is anticipated, this can be explored in more detail when undertaking a full EIA.

1d.	**Does the project, proposal or service / contract change require a full EIA?**	**Yes**	**No**
		✓	
1e.	**What are your reasons for the decision made at 1d?**	If the proposed service model is implemented it will be on the basis that face to face customer service is only provided to those residents that really need it and those that can self-serve and use other more cost effective channels do so. The expectation will be that customers self-service digitally where possible and if this is not possible then access via more cost effective supported channels i.e. telephone, web chat, email etc is utilised. Face to face would only be for those customers where other channels are not appropriate. This may impact on older people who are not as familiar with digital technology, those with a disability or people who do not have English as their first language. By removing the 'drop-in' facility for customers, it should be considered how those residents with a protected characteristic are able to access the service, and in particular how they can access a face to face appointment if this is required. Any concerns raised through the consultation should be considered. The consultation needs to take account of people with these protected characteristic to ensure they have equal access to services.	

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If a full EIA is required please progress to Part 2.

PART 2 – FULL EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

2a. Summary
Prior to the pandemic face to face customer services was offered on a reactive drop in basis from level one of Tameside One in Ashton. The opening hours were: Monday – Wednesday 8.30am – 5.00pm Thursday - 8.30am – 4.30pm Friday – 8.30am – 4.00pm Customer Services Officers, with a higher level of training, would handle all types of enquiries including those categorised as Level 1 (in-depth housing benefit and council tax enquiries) alongside Level 2 enquires (book, pay, request a service and verification of housing benefit documents). In addition to the offer at Tameside One, all libraries in the Borough also offered Level 2 service to customers, including Ashton library, which is also based in Tameside One on the ground floor. The face to face customer services function at Tameside One in Ashton has been suspended for over 12 months due to the Covid 19 pandemic. During this time, residents have had to make contact with the Council via other channels including telephone, web chat, on-line etc. Customer Service Officers have been assisting residents to complete claim forms for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support over the telephone rather than face to face. Another consequence of the coronavirus has meant that this is one of the most difficult budget rounds ever as the pandemic has led to a large increase in spending, as well as a significant reduction in revenue. The face to face Customer Services function is the most expensive provision when compared to on-line and telephone/web chat, yet it serves the fewest customers. Analysis of the enquires received at Ashton Customer Service Centre during the 12 months prior to Covid 19 indicate that nearly 66% were general level enquiries and only 34% were higher level enquiries. During normal operating times, all libraries can assist with general level enquiries, meaning that customers who are travelling to Ashton could actually seek assistance at a venue closer to their home. Also, many level 2 enquiries can be dealt with over the phone, via web chat or email. As protectors of public funds, it is incumbent upon all Council services to review the service provision from time to time and ensure services are cost effective whilst meeting residents' needs. The Covid 19 pandemic has created a unique circumstance where change has been accelerated at pace and this change has led to many residents becoming less reliant on face to face services. These circumstances should be capitalised upon when determining future service provision rather than simply returning to the previous landscape. Based on this, it is proposed that the council undertakes a review of the face to face Customer Service provision.

The ideal would be that expensive face to face customer service is only provided to those residents that really need it and those that can self-serve and use other more cost effective channels do so.

The main drivers for a review are:

Covid-19 and the health and safety of residents and staff with the likelihood that we will be living with Covid for the foreseeable future
Using learning from the lockdown to shape the future service and build back better
A desire to improve and modernise the service offer to residents
Improvements in technology and on-line support
Understanding that visiting Ashton is not always the most convenient or cost effective for residents
Take into consideration vulnerable customers to ensure they can access services and do not suffer any detriment
Use the limited resources in the best way possible and ensure the most cost effective delivery model which also meets residents requirements

The proposed service model for the future would be based on providing the most appropriate access channel according to customers' requirements and would be very similar to the current offer but with the addition of face to face contact where necessary and only for those where other channels would not be suitable. The principles would be:

Not to re-open the expensive reactive drop in customer service centre based in Tameside One at Ashton in the previous format
retain Level 2 enquiries at all Tameside Libraries
promote, encourage and support a digital first model with the expectation that where possible, residents should self-serve utilising the Council website or other technology such as applications where available.
where this is not possible a supported service offer over the telephone, web chat, email etc to assist customers with their enquiries.
where more detailed assistance is required e.g. completing a housing benefit application a telephone call back service by appointment would be available
face to face appointments only for the most vulnerable to ensure that residents are able to access services and assistance without disadvantage. These will be bookable via telephone

It is proposed to consult on this new potential customer service model with the public to ensure that all users and potential user's views are taken into consideration.

This draft EIA concentrates on ensuring that the consultation process is accessible to all residents in the Borough and that all who wish their views to be considered, including those with a protected characteristic are able to access it. The draft EIA has been prepared using customer data held by the service along with anecdotal evidence from officers. It is felt that the areas of concern may be that some protected characteristic groups (age, disability, mental health, ethnicity and low income) could be impacted more than others. This is possibly due to inability to access services digitally or by telephone. To ensure these groups' views are represented during the consultation, there will be continual monitoring of responses throughout the consultation period and if there are groups within the community that are under-represented then further discussion will take place with Action Together to assist in cascading to all groups.

Such consultation would be in the form of a standard questionnaire with an introduction to explain the reason for the proposed changes followed by the proposed change and a series of questions

to seek relevant views, which would be used to shape the future provision of the service, in particular the face-to-face aspect. Additionally there would be a free format text box to allow people to provide any comments, views and suggestions they wish to be taken into account. It is proposed that the survey forms part of the Council's Big Conversation consultation process for a 12-week period and alongside this would be available in paper format at all libraries. It is proposed that the consultation will be promoted through a number of organisations who work with the most vulnerable such as Citizens Advice, Community and Voluntary Sector organisations, Housing Associations, mental health organisations and through the Partnership and Engagement Network (PEN). Efforts will be made to target people in the protected characteristic groups that have been identified to be impacted by the proposals to complete the consultation.

2b. Issues to Consider

The issues to consider at this stage in the draft EIA are that during the consultation process the diverse population within the Borough can access the consultation and have their views taken into account and give due regard to the Equality Act.

Consideration needs to be given to equality issues relating to ability to complete the questionnaire, in particular during the covid pandemic when many face to face services are closed to the public. The questionnaire will be available digitally and there will be paper copies available in libraries; however, it needs to be acknowledged that the most vulnerable residents may have apprehensions about visiting public places during covid-19 and may possibly be in those protected characteristic groups less digitally enabled or without access to the internet. This could have a disproportionate impact on protected characteristic groups such as disability, age and ethnicity (the survey is in English), whose views we would seek to gather to reflect the impact on the proposed changes to the customer services model.

Staff will be available in libraries to assist people to complete the questionnaire if required, covid restrictions allowing. There will also be assistance on the telephone through the contact centre to help people complete the questionnaire if required. In order to seek the views of residents currently using the Customer Services facility on the telephone, officers will make the resident aware of the questionnaire during the call and will offer assistance to complete where it is required.

Face to face contact is in some instances a matter of preference for the customer. However, for certain groups it is a necessity, for example particular customers who find it difficult to complete forms without assistance, or if the query is particularly complex or there are multiple issues. This may include, amongst others, elderly customers, customers with language barriers and customers who are disabled. In addition, there are customers who do not fall into these groups but would still have difficulty completing transactions either by phone or on the internet. This may include those on very low income who have no access to the internet or phone credit to use the telephone. It is imperative that the views of these customers are received during the consultation in order to understand how the proposals may affect them.

As the proposals remove the customer services drop-in, any concerns raised in the consultation around people being able to make a face to face appointment should be considered, particularly those in a protected characteristic group who may struggle with the internet or using the telephone.

Following the consultation and during the development of the future customer services provision, a further EIA will be carried out to ensure the impact of any change is understood and managed

effectively. The EIA will include the full analysis of the consultation responses.

2c. Impact/Relevance
At this point in the draft EIA the impact of any change to the service is not known. The draft EIA concentrates on ensuring that the consultation process is accessible to the diverse population within the Borough and that all who wish their views to be considered, including those with a protected characteristic are able to access the consultation. During the consultation process returns will be monitored to ensure that they are representative of customers who use the service. Should it become apparent that the results are not representative of the community, additional interventions will need to be put in place to increase returns from any under-represented groups particularly those with a protected characteristic.

2d. Mitigations *(Where you have identified an impact/relevance, what can be done to reduce or mitigate it?)*	
Residents are not able to access the consultation due to no access to the internet	Paper copies will be accessible in libraries and help provided from library staff where it is required
Residents without digital skills who require assistance to complete the questionnaire	Help will be available through contact centre to complete the questionnaire.
Protected characteristic groups do not know about the consultation	The consultation will be accessible through the Big Conversation digitally, and paper copies will be available in libraries. The consultation will be promoted by customer services officers when advising customers on the telephone. The consultation will be promoted through the PEN, Social Media channels, Registered Providers, Public Health, Action Together, Citizens Advice and Community and Voluntary Sector organisations.
Protected characteristic groups are unable to access a face to face appointment under the new proposals	Consideration is being given to whether libraries would be able to make face to face appointments for those residents unable to use digital or telephone services.

2e. Evidence Sources
At this stage, the draft consultation is being prepared along with a report seeking approval to undertake public consultation on possible changes to the customer services model. Evidence sources at this stage in the process have been limited to: NI14 data – this is the customer services database which includes number and type of enquiry along with demographic data - ethnicity/age/disability and gender

Anecdotal evidence from the officers who work in customer services as well as colleagues in welfare rights and exchequer who have been making referrals to customer services for residents who require assistance during covid-19. Internet access – households and individuals, Great Britain - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk) https://www.tameside.gov.uk/TamesideMBC/media/policy/Equality-and-Diversity-Profile-Tameside-v9.pdf Further evidence will be considered from the consultation response from the public and partners and the EIA will be updated to reflect this.

2f. Monitoring progress		
Issue / Action	**Lead officer**	**Timescale**
Required	*Required*	*Required*

Signature of Contract / Commissioning Manager	**Date**
Signature of Assistant Director / Director	**Date**