

Response to Overview & Scrutiny board Call-in meeting 17/Aug/2015

Richard Haddock – Executive Lead for Business

10/Aug/2015

Call in Reasons – Trial closure of Connections

1. The short notice will inevitably result in inconvenience for the public. Why was a month's notice not given?

Response:

The Officers target was to develop a new Business Case for the Connections centralisation in Paignton and submit this to the October 22nd Council meeting

A meeting was arranged with Corporate Support to work back from the Oct Council date and work up a plan identifying all the numerous tasks which needed to be undertaken to hit this deadline.

The timeframe available was extremely tight and it was quite clear that without the new PDG process in place (which would have enabled full cross party consultation) it would be impossible to fully consult all parties on this decision in the given timescale. Lead Members did however consult with a number of opposition Members in the belief that this information would be cascaded to other members of their parties.

It was not possible to give the public a month's notice of the temporary closure if we were to hit the October Council deadline. We were happy however that members of the public would be given adequate instructions on how to contact the Council. (see attachment 1.)

2. The conclusion from the Priorities and Resources Review in September 2014 in relation to Connections was:

“The Board feel that the proposals in respect of Connections should be deferred due to the lack of a robust business case and financial information especially in respect of the investment in new IT infrastructure and operational costs of running the remote locations and opportunity for income from the potential lease of the Torquay Connections Office. There was also insufficient evidence on the rationale for locating the centralised Connections Office in Paignton and that the benefits of co-locating or locating the

Connections Office near to the Job Centre had not been fully explored, such as Torquay Library.”

At Council in October 2014, the proposal for a centralised Connections office at Paignton Library and Information Centre was agreed but with £102,000 of transitional funding being applied in 2015/16 to enable further work to be undertaken to review the Connections operating model and having a centralised office.

In January 2015, the Board asked the Mayor:

*“What progress has been made in developing the Business Case for a centralised Connections Office? What is the timetable associated with this proposal?
How will non-executive members be involved in the development of the Business Case?”*

And received the following written answer:

*“A report on the financial viability of centralising Connections in Paignton is currently with the Mayor for his consideration.
We are currently re-designing our Website; on-line forms; back office processes to improve our "self service" offer which will also support any future Connections office centralisation.”*

It remains the case that the business case for centralising Connections has not been shared with all members. Members would wish to see the original business case and any other supporting information taken into account by the Executive Lead for Business in reaching his decision (including any impact assessment of the temporary closure) prior to the call in meeting. This would allow a greater understanding of these proposals.

Response:

The 2015/16 budget process proposed that Customer Services Connections Offices centralised in Paignton Library & Information Centre (PLAIC). The old business case (Operating Model & Financial appraisal) proposal was that Customer Services would occupy part of the space on the ground floor currently occupied by the Library Service.

The proposal required an investment of approximately £280k, this included the cost of reconfiguration of the ground floor and first floor.

Due to the level of investment required and the changes to working practices since October 2014, at Mayors Executive Group on the 9th July 2015 there was a discussion about trialling the closure of Torquay and Brixham Connections and operate from the existing Connections location within Paignton Library and Information Centre.

The old Business case is not deemed relevant now and the trial closure and data gathered from this will assist in developing a new Business case which can be presented to Scrutiny or PDG's at the appropriate time.

We have provided however in (attachment 1.) a more detailed report which will give Scrutiny Members further information which will assist them in their scrutiny role.

3. Whilst it is hoped that the following points will be covered in the business case and supporting information referred to above, for completeness:

- (a) What consultation has there been with key partners such as the Department of Work & Pensions?

Response:

The DWP were informed and had no objections to the temporary closure and it was agreed that customers visiting Torquay and Brixham job centre during the trial would be given a leaflet advising them how to contact the Council.

Age UK were informed with no major objections.

- (b) Is there sufficient capacity at Paignton library to handle all enquiries?

Response:

see comments in (attachment 1.)

- (c) What impact will there be on the quality of advice to members of the public by delivering the face to face service in a location where the back office staff are not located?

Response:

The quality of advice to members of the public should not be impacted however the trial will show whether this is true or not.

- (d) There would appear to be failure to consult with staff, Unions and back bench Councillors prior to implementation. Why was this not undertaken?

Response:

Customer Services advisors were consulted and no issues were raised. All customer services staff (apart from two) rotate on a shift basis and work in all 3 Connections locations.

It was an oversight that Human Resources (HR) were not advised of this matter and therefore the appropriate discussions with Trades Unions have not taken place concerning this matter.

However, it is an unusual situation from a change perspective, as there is no actual change at present, other than the temporary closure and no one is impacted in terms of an employment situation. The current contractual working arrangements allow for staff to work at any of the 3 locations of Brixham, Paignton, Torquay or indeed the call centre. HR and the Trades Unions should have been informed of this matter before any temporary closure in order that a decision could be made about the consultation process.

4. Why was there no mention in the press release of how Torquay residents could be assisted in getting to Paignton library? E.g. Bus passes. How would they be picked up if the Torquay office is closed? In light of it being the summer holidays, is the Council prepared to issue bus passes for the children of claimants who would be accompanying their parent/s during the summer holidays? What is the estimated budget to cover transport for people having to travel to Paignton?

Response:

It was never the intention to offer free bus passes other than to those that were deemed homeless. We believe that these will be limited in number over the month trial closure (bus passes offered from Brixham and Paignton to Torquay over the last 6 months is approx. 15 – approx £75).

In the event that bus passes need to be offered these will be issued from the locations as follows:

From Brixham Library - Library staff will issue the bus pass if deemed necessary by Housing services.(process to be finalised)

From Torquay – Housing will be responsible for distributing bus passes. (Process & location to be finalised)

The trial will identify whether these new processes for issuing bus passes become a major issue.

ATTACHMENT 1. – Trial closure of Connections - further background information

Background

At full Council in October 2014, the proposal for a centralised Connections office at Paignton Library and Information Centre was agreed but with £102,000 of transitional funding built into the base budget being applied in 2015/16 to enable further work to be undertaken to review the Connections operating model and having a centralised office.

The 2015/16 budget process proposed that Customer Services centralised in Paignton Library & Information Centre (PLAIC). The proposal was that Customer Services would occupy part of the space on the ground floor currently occupied by the Library Service. The proposal required an investment of approximately £280k, this included the cost of reconfiguration of the ground floor and first floor.

Due to the level of investment required and the changes to working practices since October 2014, it was agreed at Mayors Executive Group on the 9th July 2015 to trial the closure of Torquay and Brixham Connections and operate from the existing Connections location within Paignton Library and Information Centre.

Customer Services currently manage three face to face offices:

- Torquay Connections located at Town Hall Torquay
- Paignton Connections located within Paignton Library and Information Centre
- Brixham Connections located with Brixham Library
- (Main Reception at Torquay Town Hall is also managed by Customer Services)

Many neighbouring authorities now operate from one central location as follows:–

Council	Population	Number of face to face public offices
Torbay	131,000	3
Plymouth	260,000	1
Teignbridge	126,000	1
Exeter	121,000	1
South Hams	83,000	1

Why run a trial closure?

The purpose of this proposal is to understand the impact a permanent closure in Torquay and Brixham would have on service users and the community. Customer Service data will also be collected to inform the future Business case development process.

The trial will establish the following –

- Which channels of communication customers from Torquay and Brixham use
- Issues that customers will face visiting a central location
- The increase in footfall to Paignton Connections
- If the current space occupied by Paignton Connections is sufficient both in terms of size and facilities **(This would reduce the investment required and allow the Library Service to operate from the existing space and strengthen the overall Business case to centralise in Paignton)**
- Any operation issues from service areas that facilitate face to face appointments in Torquay Connections
- The impact on Main Reception, Torquay Library & Brixham Library

To facilitate the increase in footfall to Paignton Connections a new operating model has been identified. This will be a fluid operating model and staffing levels will be reviewed once the increase in footfall is known.

What has been the trend in demand over the last 5 years?

Face to face demand has been gradually reducing year on year as customers choose alternative channels of contact. **It is worth noting that since April 2010 our face to face demand in our Connections Offices has reduced by around 34000 visits and we predict that this will continue over the next five years due to improvements in our Self Service (Web) and telephony customer contact offer. The governments “digital by default agenda” promotes this strategy.**

Method of contact	Period	Number
Face to Face Demand	April 2010 to Mar 2011	101387 visitors
	April 2011 to Mar 2012	94465 visitors
	April 2012 to Mar 2013	81994 visitors
	April 2013 to Mar 2014	71578 visitors
	April 2014 to Mar 2015	66,896 visitors

What have we done to channel shift our customers to use self service (Web) and telephony channels?

In November 2014 the operating models in Torquay & Paignton offices were changed to achieve the following –

- Introduce and promote the use of on-line services and telephones to customers as these channels cost less than a face to face transaction.
- To maximise capacity to the call centre (Staff in the face to face offices now answer calls as well as dealing with the face to face customers)
- Improve performance to the call centre. (Answer rate is over 80% and waiting times are less than 1 minute)
- To bring the service into line with other organisations e.g. DWP, HMRC (pushing more Self service & telephone support)
- To enable vulnerable customers to see an Customer Service Advisor (CSA) promptly to resolve their enquiry

What impact have these changes had on our face to face demand?

Torquay Connections

- 50 customers a week seen by a CSA on the counter
- 900 customers per week – triaged (Document scanning only, directed to on-line service, directed to free phone to the Call Centre, pre arranged appointment or low level enquiry)

Customer Service staff are available within the office to direct customers to the appropriate channel depending on their enquiry and assist customers with the use of on-line transactions

Paignton Connections

- 50 customers a week seen by a CSA on the counter
- 450 customers a week at the Reception desk (Document scanning only, directed to on-line service, directed to free phone to the Call Centre, pre arranged appointment or low level enquiry)

Brixham Connections

- 90 customers per week. All enquiries are dealt with by a Customer Service Advisor.

How have these changes affected staffing levels?

When not assisting customers to self serve or dealing with face to face customers, all CSA's now answer telephone calls to the call centre. This has resulted in a 20% increase in the calls answered within the Call Centre whilst achieving a future 1.5 fte saving by mid Aug 2015.

How will we communicate the temporary trial closure?

Posters will be displayed at Torquay & Brixham Connections advising customers of the alternative methods of contact during the closure.

Leaflets will be available for customers who visit Brixham Library and Main Reception. These detail the arrangements and provide contact information.

Torquay & Brixham Job Centre will also receive a supply of the leaflets and staff will be informed to ensure that customers are not signposted to either office during the closure. Social media and twitter will also be used to inform customers of the trial and any feedback will be captured.

The website www.torbay.gov.uk will be updated to inform customers of the closure. A message will be recorded to inform all callers to the call centre that the offices are closed from xxth August to xxth September (date to be agreed)

What will the new operating model look like during the Temporary closure?

Main Reception:

In addition to the CSA who currently manages the visitors to Main Reception and the calls to switchboard, a Customer Services Team Leader will be present to identify and resolve any issues. They will also manage and record the volume of customers that visit Main Reception as a result of the Torquay Connections being closed.

Brixham Connections:

No customer service advisors will be present. Customers will have use of free telephone line within the office during the library opening times.

There will be the facility for customers to deposit documents for scanning.

Customers who are library members can book the use of a computer. There is a small charge for non library members.

Paignton Connections:

Customers will be met by CSA's to establish the nature of the enquiry and signposted to the appropriate area.

The self service computers currently located in Torquay Connections will be moved to Paignton for the duration of the trial. Staff will be available to assist customers to search the website and complete any on-line forms should they require assistance.

There will be additional free phones for customers to telephone the call centre.

Customers that require documents scanning will be directed to the facility.

The Reception desk will be used to check in customers who have an appointment. This includes the existing Registrars appointments.

Housing Appointments will also be undertaken at Paignton during this period. Travel warrants will be available for customers that have a genuine need to visit Paignton for a Housing Appointments and who have no means of transport without financial assistance.

Low level enquiries that require face to face assistance such as bus pass applications, parking permits and the purchasing of Radar keys will also be facilitated at the Paignton Reception desk.

Customers with complex enquiries or who are unable to use the on – line facility or free phone will be able to see a CSA to resolve their enquiry.

There will be a security presence in Paignton Connections.

The staffing levels will be revised once the foot fall is known. If required, additional staff can be transferred to Paignton Connections or if there is sufficient capacity, CSA's will assist the Call Centre whilst remain at Paignton should the demand suddenly increase.

Extra resources within Paignton Connections:

In addition to the new operating model, additional resources will be introduced to the existing Paignton office space.

There will be a mixture of computer terminals, free phones and operational staff within the office. This will enable 8 customers to be served concurrently. In addition there will be 5 staff including 1 Security Officer to meet customers, direct them to the appropriate location and provide general assistance.

The operating model will enable the following footfall to be serviced–

1. 8 customer enquiry points. Average transaction length 10 minutes = 1920 transactions per week
2. 1 scanning point. Average transaction length 5 minutes = 480 transactions per week

Total capacity = 2400 customers per week

The trial will identify the increase in footfall at Paignton Connections and across other channels.

What do we predict the footfall might be in Paignton Connections?

Examples – of potential demand within Paignton Connections during the trial

	Based on 100% face to face contact at Torquay & Brixham visiting Paignton office	Based on 70% face to face contact at Torquay & Brixham visiting Paignton office	Based on 40% face to face contact at Torquay & Brixham visiting Paignton office
Torquay Connections (Average 750 customers per week)	950	665	380
Paignton Connections (Average 500 customers a week will continue to visit)	500	500	500
Brixham Connections (Average 90 customers per week)	90	63	36
Total predicted footfall	1540	1228	916

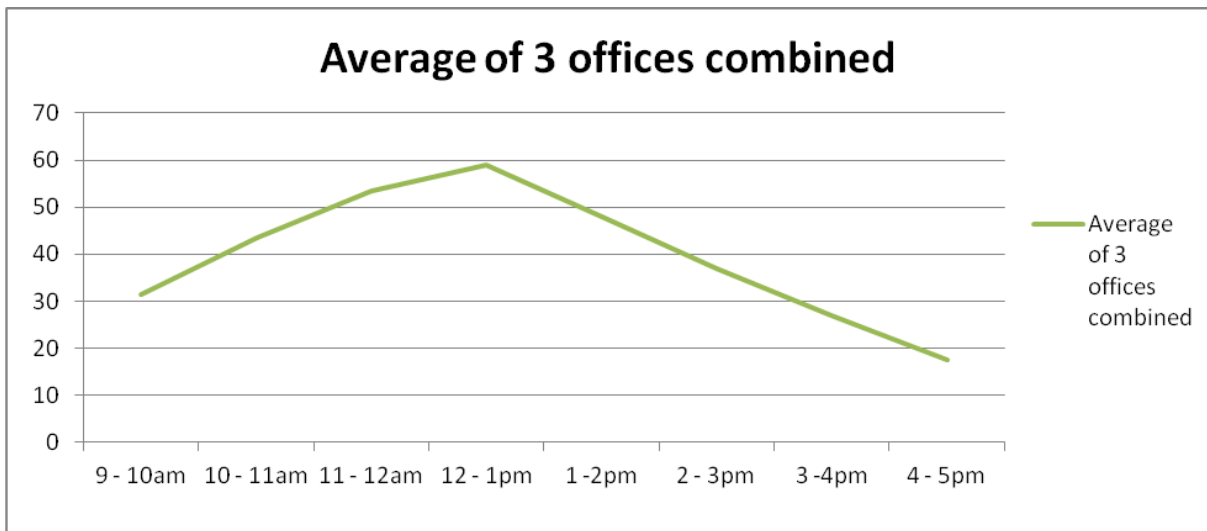
In addition to the total footfall, the current hourly footfall for all 3 offices has been monitored to identify peaks and troughs to ensure that the additional resources are sufficient to meet customer demand.

Working on the assumption that 100% of face to face contact at Torquay & Brixham visit Paignton office the maximum volume of customers in one hour is 60. It is anticipated that the 8 customer enquiry points would be sufficient to manage with the footfall.

This will be monitored closely during the trial; action will be taken, if required, to reduce waiting times by adding additional capacity from Customer Service Advisors.

The intelligence gathered during the trial will then be included in the Business case.

Graph showing average of daily demand across all 3 Connections Offices



What information will we gather from the trial closure?

In addition to a full customer consultation between xxth August and xxst September, (date to be established) other information will be collected during the trial as follows:

- The increase to the number of calls to the Call Centre
- The increase in electronic transactions
- The footfall within Paignton Connections and the enquiry types
- The volume of customers that visit Main Reception with enquiries relating to Torquay Connections (These will be signposted)
- Customers visiting Paignton Connections from Torquay or Brixham will be asked –
 - What transport they used to travel to Paignton
 - The enquiry type
 - Channel used to resolve their enquiry
 - Any additional comments that the customer wishes to provide

Operational issues will be resolved on a case by case basis but will be recorded. Any issues that are identified by back office services will also be recorded and resolved.

Any complaints will be recorded and responded to in line with the corporate policy and timescales.

Customer Service staff will be consulted to identify any issues and their opinions.

Weekly meetings will be arranged with back office area to discuss any issues and provide an opportunity to feedback.

What are the predicted costs of the trial?

Additional computer terminals will be required. These will be transferred from Torquay Connections for the duration trial to enable customers to complete on-line transactions.

Additional signage and leaflets will be required at an estimated cost of £400

It is not envisaged that there will be any other costs.