

Consultation Paper

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**Subject**      *Face to Face Services*

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# 1. Background

The Council has an agreed customer contact strategy that commits us to:

- providing customers with more choice about how they access Council services
- increasing the range of services that customers can access through each service channel
- improving the quality of the services that we provide across all access channels
- achieving value for money.

A corporate improvement team, led by the Strategic Director for Housing, Health and Community, has been implementing this strategy across the Council's three access channels – face to face, telephony and the web.

## 2. Scope of this paper

This consultation paper focuses on the future provision of face to face services. It should be read in relation to our commitment to achieving value for money.

The current strategy commits us to:

- organising fixed-site provision in a hub formation – one central city location supported by a small number of neighbourhood offices
- determining future office location on the basis of customer demand rather than current location of Council buildings
- closing remaining receptions in the city centre and offices in the neighbourhoods where demand is low.

As a Council we need to decide whether to:

- maintain and extend the current commitment to face to face service delivery

or

- manage customer demand to other, less expensive access channels, i.e. telephone or web.

If we wish to extend our current commitment we need to decide where new neighbourhood sites should be. Any future neighbourhood sites would be expected to be examples of good partnership working with other relevant organisations in the City. For reasons set out in detail in this paper, Council officers feel that there is a strong case to be made for a new one stop shop in the Cowley Centre.

No decision has yet been taken on this matter. As part of this consultation process we are seeking:

- views on our current commitment to face to face services

- feedback on the Cowley Centre proposal
- views on other possible locations.

### 3. Current Position

Face-to-face services are currently delivered through:

- Four sites in the city centre (Town Hall, Ramsay House, Blue Boar Street, Cash Office).
- Local Services Shops (St Aldate's Chambers, East Oxford, Blackbird Leys). Demand at the Local Services shops is high and reached 71,555 in the last financial year.
- Local Housing Offices (Barton, Carfax, Rose Hill, Blackbird Leys). Housing Services are moving away from permanent contact points and increasingly focusing on home visits as the main form of face to face service. This is designed to be a far more proactive approach to providing help and advice and identifying service need.
- Housing surgeries at various locations, including Local Service Shops. Housing services are offered to the public 2 days each week from each site.

#### Issues

1. St Aldates Chambers is the main city centre contact point.
  - This is the busiest site of its type in the County, dealing with 47,000 enquiries a year (av 170 interviews per day). It also provides duty officer surgeries for housing options and local housing services.
  - The capacity of the site is often overstretched, increasing risks to the safety of the staff.
  - There are proposals to redevelop this site and the future of the Local Services Shop - both in the short term during redevelopment, and in the longer term - is unclear. It may result in additional demand on local sites.
2. The Cash Office in the city centre will close in early 2007.
  - Payments processing and the range of incidental enquiries to which the service responded will not be dealt with in future.
  - The impact of the withdrawal of this service on the site in St Aldate's and other contact points is difficult to assess.
3. Ramsay House provides a point for service specific enquiries related to Planning, Taxi Licensing, Building Control and Environmental Health Services.
4. Blue Boar Street has been closed as a reception point. It was small and the services housed there attracted few customers in the normal course of business.
5. Blackbird Leys Local Services shop is a temporary building that has outlasted its design life. We need to decide how services currently delivered through this site will be delivered.

- In 2005/6 the site handled 11,649 enquiries (av. 46 per day), its busiest year. 50% of enquiries are housing tenancy related. A reduction in opening times has coincided with an increase in the number of enquiries dealt with. The daily average is now 80 per day. This suggests that there is still demand for face to face services despite the improved accessibility to services via the phone.
  - The shop is sited on rented ground and the lease is due to expire in May 2007. The lease will be extended pending decisions about replacement.
  - Current planning permission is due to expire in 2007/8.
  - All housing back office services have been relocated to Horspath in early November 2006. The Housing Service provides a surgery 2 days a week and Customer Services, due to staff shortages, have recently reduced their one stop presence from 5 days to the same 2 days.
  - The site is entirely funded from the Housing Revenue Account. If Oxford City Homes were to withdraw fully, Customer Services would also have to withdraw as there is currently no budget to continue.
6. East Oxford Local Services shop is well used and its capacity is sometimes exceeded.
- In 2005/6 the site handled 12748 (av. 51 per day) although the profile of the customer base here is different with only 12% relating to housing tenancy and 52% being housing benefit.
  - The current lease is due to expire in July 2008.

## 4. Options for Change

The following are the main choices under consideration.

### City Centre Services

Maintaining the status quo is not an option because:

- demand on the existing facility has exceeded capacity
- redevelopment plans will impact on St Aldates Chambers.

There are three possible options.

#### Redesign the existing St Aldate's site to meet customer demand

Redevelopment proposals may present opportunities to improve the customer experience on this site in that the front end of the building facing St Aldate's will probably be retained. This could enable us to increase available floor space. While the development company would probably fund building improvements, current rent would increase. Building work could start in early 2008. The redevelopment proposals will be the subject of a separate detailed report to Committees.

However, as the redevelopment proposals are not finalised it is unclear at this stage whether the benefits from a redesign of the public area will be possible. We therefore need to consider alternative options.

### Operating from another similar city centre site

This would mean taking up valuable retail premises. The costs would also probably be prohibitive.

### Developing space in the Town Hall to replace the existing SAC facility.

There are a number of advantages to this.

- Customers associate the Town Hall with the Council and so it would make sense to access services from there.
- The Council owns the site and so annual premises costs could be reduced. If we retain an interest in the St Aldate's site we may be able to sub-let to a retailer and create a significant income stream or alternatively increase the capital receipt for the site from the developer.

The Town Hall option also raises problems.

- The building's design and listed status present complex access issues that might be difficult to overcome in the time scales we are looking at.
- It is unclear precisely what floor space could be made available. It is unlikely to be appreciably larger than that created by a redesigned St Aldate's Chambers.
- Its use as a customer focus point would impact on income from its present use and on future grant funding for maintenance and other development opportunities.

### **Local Services**

Maintaining the status quo is not an option as the Blackbird Leys site has a limited life.

Options include:

- replacing the Blackbird Leys site with another fixed site location
- holding surgeries at a variety of sites
- closing down satellite sites and transferring resources to telephone based services.

### Replacing the Blackbird Leys site with another fixed site location

The corporate improvement team have identified the Cowley Centre as an appropriate replacement site. It:

- is accessible to several areas with high demand for Council services including Blackbird Leys, Cowley, Barton and Headington
- complies with the council's Social Inclusion policy of improving access to services
  - has good transport links
  - is a natural location for a contact hub because it is frequented by customers for other purposes.

The Social Inclusion Strategy highlights the most deprived areas of Oxford as being in the Barton, Rose Hill, Blackbird Leys, Littlemore, Wood Farm, Donington Bridge and Carfax areas. The majority of these areas – Blackbird Leys, Littlemore, Rose Hill and Donington Bridge – are nearby and have good access to the Cowley Centre. There are also relatively large numbers of older people living in Cowley.

There are other practical advantages. It would:

- clearly signify the Council's commitment to delivering high quality services to residents who are amongst the most deprived in the city.
- be an ideal location for a "property shop" to support the development of the choice-based lettings programme.
- be used as a base for other Council services and also for services provided by other agencies (e.g. DWP, police, post office).

A Cowley Centre site could provide a multi-agency one stop service. This could pilot a model of service provision that could be extended in future to other areas of the city.

#### Holding surgeries at a variety of sites

Improved mobile technology means that we can provide local surgeries in areas around the city where there is clear demand. These surgeries require accommodation which:

- meets health and safety standards to protect our staff and customers
- is appropriate to the volumes of enquiries.

Our experience of these surgeries to date indicates that they are only sporadically used and are not convenient for customers who don't want to or can't wait until the next surgery is due.

This kind of mobile service lends itself more effectively to one-off home visits for those in greatest need or with mobility problems. This approach also makes better use of staffing resources as all contact is appointment based.

#### Closing down satellite sites and transferring resources to telephone based services.

This is an option for some services. The Council has vastly improved its telephone services and now offers comprehensive telephone contact for most of its well-used services. This has not so far reduced face to face demand at any of the existing Local Services Shops. Also, services such as housing options and benefits that require personal interviews and submission of documents will still require physical points of contact.

It would reduce the choice of access for our very broad range of customers, particularly for the most vulnerable members of society and would not comply with current Council policy.

## **5. Costs**

### **Local Services**

The costs of opening and maintaining leased property in the Cowley Centre will incur additional cost to the Council.

### **Annual Running Costs**

Current premises costs of Blackbird Leys are estimated as follows:-

<b>Description</b>	<b>Amount £</b>
Refuse Collection	£900.00
Rent	£4,700.00
Business Rates	£3,400.00
Water & Sewerage Charges	£190.00
External Telephone Charges	£6,000.00
Other Computing Services - Comms Line	£8,240.00
Annual Capital Charge	£0.50
Cleaning and Maintenance	£1500.00
	<b>£24,930.50</b>

Estimated cost of a unit at Cowley Centre is as follows:-

This uses the unit at 185 – 187 Barns Road (formerly Zenith windows) as an example. It has 1,934 square feet (185 sq metres), a little over twice the size of the public area at Blackbird Leys and is well situated on a corner adjacent to the main bus stop and opposite the OCHA building.

<b>Description</b>	<b>Amount £</b>
Rent	£52,500.00
Business Rates	£20,000.00
Service Charges	£2,839.00
External Telephone Charges	£6,000.00
Other Computing Services - Comms Line etc	£5,000.00
Cleaning and Maintenance	£7,000.00
Utilities and other services	£6,000.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>£99,399.00</b>

However, it should be noted that the Housing Revenue Account funds the premises costs of the Blackbird Leys site. The extent to which the HRA could contribute to these costs would reflect the proportion of the services provided from the new site that related to HRA functions.

The costs make no reference to any additional staffing costs that may be necessary. The permanent customer services resources deployed in Blackbird Leys would be transferred.

Services that have expressed a positive interest in the proposals are Oxford City Homes as a permanent site for tenant enquiries and housing allocations in relation to choice based lettings. We have also had discussions with other agencies such as the DWP pensions service who would be able to provide surgeries from there.

The creation of an access point in the Cowley Centre represents good value for money when compared with the costs of a comparable site in the City centre that would be at least three times as much.

Rents quoted by the letting agents will be subject to negotiation and the Council is in a strong position as a potential tenant. It is likely that a short lease of 5 years would be agreed to keep options open for any opportunities that may arise from future changes to the community centre in Barnes Road.

### **Set up costs**

These are difficult to estimate until there is a final agreed design. Set up would include design and build both internally and externally, DDA compliance works, communications links for phone and data and office equipment. Discussions with Oxford City Homes who would undertake most of the building work and the building design team in Built Environment are suggesting a capital cost of between £90K and £118K. A bid for this to be included in the capital programme would need to be submitted.

### **City Centre Services**

Set up costs and the on-going rent liability for a revised St Aldates Chambers service and future rent liability will be subject to the final negotiations with the developers that are on going at the time of writing.

A move to the Town Hall would inevitably incur set up costs and these would be subject to a design and feasibility process.

However, the costs could be offset by the additional income stream or capital receipt from the developers.

## **6. Recommendations and Actions**

It is recommended to:

1. Agree to maintain and extend the current commitment to face to face service delivery.
2. If agreed ,to confirm that the Cowley Centre be an appropriate site for a Local Council Office and if so:
  - take further steps and negotiations to secure a suitable unit in the Cowley Centre
  - produce a design and detailed costings in respect of set up costs once a specific unit is identified
  - place a bid in the current bids and savings process to fund any shortfall in running costs.
  - submit a capital bid to cover the set up costs
3. Agree that the future provision of a City centre facility be concluded out of the negotiations with the developers of the St Aldates Chambers site.