

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE – 29 MARCH 2011

Title:

REVIEW OF HASLEMERE & CRANLEIGH LOCAL OFFICES

**[Portfolio Holder: Cllr Stefan Reynolds]
[Wards Affected: All Haslemere & Cranleigh Wards]**

Summary and purpose:

This report sets out the findings of an independent review carried out by a seconded officer from the Government Office of the South East (GOSE). The review was to consider the effectiveness of the Council's local offices at Haslemere and Cranleigh following changes in operational arrangements which were introduced in June 2010 and proposes a refocusing of the services provided in Cranleigh and Haslemere.

How this report relates to the Council's Corporate Priorities:

This report relates to the Council's priorities of value for money, customer focused services and improving lives by providing accessible locations for the provision of face-to-face service. The latter is particularly important for the more vulnerable and disadvantaged members of Waverley's community.

Equality and Diversity Implications:

The provision of service outlets in each of the Council's main centres of population serves to ensure residents are not disadvantaged or excluded from services that might otherwise involve a visit to the Council's central offices in Godalming.

Climate Change Implications:

There are no climate change implications.

Resource/Value for Money implications:

The approved budget for 2011/12 includes provision for the operational, mainly building costs, of the local office provision at Cranleigh and Haslemere with staffing resources for the services provided being met from within the existing service establishment.

Legal Implications:

There are no specific legal implications.

Background

1. Historically one of the principal uses of the the Council's local offices was for payment of housing rents and Council Tax bills. However following a review in 2008/09 the Council changed its payment receiving services by providing facilities for payments at Post Offices and All pay outlets and in November 2009 Waverley's local cash offices were closed.
2. The closure of Waverley's cash offices as expected had an impact on usage of the local offices and visitor numbers declined. As a result from November 2009 opening hours at all three local offices were reduced and the generalist staffing numbers was reduced to reflect the anticipated lower demand.
3. The service currently provided at Cranleigh and Haslemere are primarily based around service areas providing specialist staff to operate from each location on particular day/half days. This model of service introduced in June 2010 and replaced the provision of permanently based generalist locality office staff at the two offices. A schedule of the current service level provided at Haslemere and Cranleigh is attached at Annexe 1.
4. The Executive in approving the changed model of local office service provision decided that the revised service should be undertaken reviewed later in the year to assess the effectiveness of the new arrangements.
5. An independent review to consider the effectiveness of the local office service at Haslemere and Cranleigh was commissioned to be undertaken by David Webb a secondee to Waverley from the Government Office of the South East (GOSE) who has a background in customer service provision.

Review methodology

6. The review carried out by David Webb from GOSE was to consider the value of the service being provided at Haslemere and Cranleigh taking into account the level of public use of the offices, the appropriateness of the service provided and the cost of local service provision.
7. The review involved visits to the offices and the observation of them in operation. A series of interviews were carried out with the staff who work at the offices to obtain feedback on the take-up of services and any issues concerning the appropriateness of the existing office locations and the facilities provided. Interviews and discussions with partner organisations were also conducted to consider co-location opportunities and other opportunities for service provision in Haslemere and Cranleigh.
8. An in-depth survey of customer enquiries at the two offices was carried out to assess the public use of the services provided at the two offices.
9. In considering the longer term role for local service provision comparative information was also collected from other local authorities to assess developments and service provision elsewhere.

Main findings of the review

Services Provided

10. The table below sets out the results of a two week analysis of customer enquiries at the Haslemere and Cranleigh Local Offices, the survey was undertaken during November 2010:

Two Week Survey of Customer Numbers Undertaken in November 2010 (each office opens for 18 hours per week therefore 36 hours in two weeks)

OFFICE	BEN/ CTAX	ENV	HSG	PLAN	SCC	TRAVEL/ CONCESS FARES	OTHER	TOTAL	Visits / enquiries per hour	% Non-main business queries*
	Enq Nos	Enq Nos	Enq Nos	Enq Nos	Enq Nos	Enq Nos	Enq Nos	Enq Nos		
CRANLEIGH	24	4	6	9	3	17	18	81	2.3	47%
HASLEMERE	39	6	11	14	0	10	24	104	2.9	33%
TOTAL	63	10	17	23	3	27	42	185		

**Non-main business enquiries are categorised as Surrey County Council (SCC) enquiries, travel/concessionary fares which will be transferring to SCC in April 2011, and 'Other' enquiries mainly relating to other agencies such as town and parish councils, tourism, utility bodies etc.*

Discussions carried out with the service staff working at the two offices confirmed that the pattern of visitors over the two week in-depth study reflects the average footfall experienced at the two offices.

11. Removing the non-main Waverley business enquiries (SCC, Other and Travel/Concessionary Fares responsibility for which will transfer to SCC from April 2011) makes actual Waverley core business enquiries significantly lower. The table above shows that non-main Waverley business enquiries account for 47% and 33% of all enquiries at Cranleigh and Haslemere respectively. If the core Waverley business enquiries only are taken into account the actual enquiries per hour at each office as evidenced from the two week detailed study undertaken are as follows:

WBC Core Business Enquiries Per Hour

Local Office	Average WBC business enquiries per hour
Cranleigh	1.2
Haslemere	2.1

12. The average customer throughput for core Waverley services as set out in the table above make it difficult to justify the range of services currently provided when the level of demand is so low.
13. Annexe 2 sets out the views of the individual service areas currently providing the local office provision at Haslemere and Cranleigh. The views of the staff providing the local services are can be summarised as supporting the local provision of service for Planning, Benefits and Housing. However there is little take up of the face to face service currently offered for Environmental

Services and Council Tax. The experience is that the usual method of customer interaction for Council Tax and Environmental Service enquiries are via telephone contact or in some cases e-mail rather than face to face.

Conclusions on services to be provided

14. The review has concluded that in the light of the relatively low level of take up of some services provided by specialist staff at Cranleigh and Haslemere the service provision should be refocused to the three key service areas of Planning, Benefits and Housing. The refocused services to be based on pre-booked appointments on particular days of the week. Annexe 3 sets out a proposed basis for the surgery based service.
15. The review also identified an opportunity to improve the provision of Waverley service information generally by making more use of other outlets especially libraries for the delivery of more generic information services and as signposting services to Waverley. This could be achieved by regular and up to date information on the range of Waverley services being more visibly available at other outlets like libraries.

Existing accommodation and facilities at the Haslemere and Cranleigh Offices

16. The Haslemere service operates from the Council's Locality Office building at Weyhill, Lion Green, Shottermill and the Cranleigh service operates from within the refurbished Cranleigh Leisure Centre from a small public counter and from a very small interview room.
17. Each of the two offices have good communication links including telephone extensions that operate from the Council's main switchboard and IT network facilities that provide access to all the Council's business system applications.
18. Annexe 3 attached sets out the views of staff using the two local offices and particularly their shortcomings which may be summarised as follows:

Haslemere

There are concerns about the need to operate from a stand alone building which requires two members of staff when this may not be justified in terms of visitor numbers.

Cranleigh

Facilities within the Leisure Centre are not fit for purpose – office/counter is too noisy, the counter is too low, the interview room is too small and there are concerns over the privacy of information due to the layout.

Conclusions on accommodation and facilities

19. The proposed refocused service provision as outlined above would not require a dedicated office but rather the use of an interview room and waiting area for an appointment based service. For this reason, and also because of the shortcomings with the existing locations identified, the review concluded that for both local offices the preferred option would be to relocate and share facilities with partner organisations. Accordingly discussions are underway with partner organisations to identify the most appropriate facilities in Cranleigh and Haslemere.

Summary of findings

20. The review confirmed the value of providing a local face to face service for customers in Haslemere and Cranleigh but customer take-up statistics indicate the services provided need to be refined and refocused to reflect core Waverley functions where face to face service is valued and viable. The services to be provided should be Planning, Benefits and Housing and that these services should be offered on an appointment basis.
21. As regards the location of local offices the review concluded that both the Cranleigh and Haslemere local offices functions should be relocated, the preferred option being to relocate and share facilities with partner organisations.
22. The review proposes making greater use of libraries in particular as access points for Waverley information.

Recommendation

It is recommended that:

1. the revised operational arrangements for surgery based local offices at Cranleigh and Haslemere be approved; and
2. alternative locations for the provision of the Council's surgery based local offices at Cranleigh and Haslemere be brought back for consideration to the Executive at its next meeting.

Background Papers

There are no background papers (as defined by Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972) relating to this report.

CONTACT OFFICER:

Name: Roger Standing **Telephone:** 01483 523221
E-mail: roger.standing@waverley.gov.uk

ANNEXE 1

Existing Service Provision At The Cranleigh And Haslemere Local Offices

Cranleigh Office	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
AM	Benefits and Council Tax service		Environmental Services	Planning Advice Surgery (<i>TBC</i>)	Housing Advice - rents, tenancies, housing management
PM	Benefits and Council Tax service	Housing Advice - rents, tenancies, housing management (<i>TBC</i>)			

Haslemere Office	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
AM	Housing Advice - rents, tenancies, housing management (<i>TBC</i>)	Benefits and Council Tax service (Three Counties Advice Service)			
PM		Benefits and Council Tax service (Three Counties Advice Service)	Environmental Services	Planning Advice Surgery (<i>TBC</i>)	Housing Advice – rents, tenancies, housing management

ANNEXE 2

VIEWS OF THE SERVICE AREA STAFF PROVIDING THE LOCAL OFFICE PROVISION

OFFICE	PLANNING	BENEFITS/COUNCIL TAX	HOUSING	ENVIRON SERVICES
Haslemere	<p>Pre-application sessions particularly well attended - full booking lists on most days. Hmere picks up Farnham customer 'spill-over' and Cranleigh also serves this purpose for Godalming main office. Use entire staff team to provide '2nd' person at LOs.</p>	<p>Overall, locality office service working ok for Benefits Team. Reasonable footfall and likely to carry on being busy with revised benefit arrangements and economic climate.</p> <p>Major issue around Council Tax Team having to cover LOs. Footfall very low for this service, liable to decrease and nature of queries more suitable for phone/web solutions. Also small staff team and distance to LOs mean providing cover is increasingly difficult at Hmere and Cran. Suggest short term solution of re-visiting LO provision to see if another service would be better deployed, or re-jig to remove Ctax presence.</p>	<p>Overall, concern that low footfall doesn't justify large number of sessions at either Cran/Hmere LOs. Concern about late opening at Hmere. Suggest 4.45 closing to time in line with main office. Also concern that visitors do not appreciate that they are not meeting generic staff. Would like temporary signage to indicate which service is currently running sessions. Also, given low footfall would suggest easier for staff if sessions ran all day at one location, rather than ½ day split across two.</p>	<p>1. Env. Services experience very low footfall at both Cran/Hmere, and their services increasingly web/phone based rather than face-to-face. Also by their nature, enquiries unlikely to require private office or appt times. Service obligation previously fulfilled by ex-generic c/s staff member, and since departure it has become harder to provide staff cover.</p> <p>2. Also used by Licensing Service for taxi registrations, and voluntary community organisation (SADAS) counselling service. Strong support for continuity of area service as works well</p>
Cranleigh	<p>See above, but double staff coverage at Cranleigh a particular problem. 'Drop-in' format on Wednesday now at Godalming so consequent pick-up in Cranleigh booked appts. Reservations about office layout etc, not really suitable.</p>	<p>See above, but reinforced issues raised over difficult working conditions at Cranleigh – noise, unsuitable set-up and problems during hot weather.</p>	<p>See above, but specific issues about noisy location and lack of privacy, particularly for difficult interviews situations. Low counter also makes it hard to maintain information privacy.</p>	<p>See 1. above.</p>

Proposed Service Model For The Cranleigh And Haslemere Local Offices

Cranleigh Office	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
AM	Benefits service			Planning Advice Surgery	Housing Advice - rents, tenancies, housing management
PM	Benefits service	Housing Advice - rents, tenancies, housing management (<i>TBC</i>)			

Haslemere Office	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
AM	Housing Advice - rents, tenancies, housing management	Benefits service			
PM		Benefits service		Planning Advice Surgery	Housing Advice – rents, tenancies, housing management