

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Employment Committee
Date: 11th February 2013
Report for: Information
Report of: Joanne Hyde, Director of Human Resources

Report Title

Christmas Closure 2012 – Review

Summary

This paper provides the results of a review of the Christmas closure of key administrative buildings over the period Monday 24th December 2012 to Tuesday 1st January 2013 inclusive.

Recommendation(s)

- That Employment Committee notes the findings and lessons learned, together with the resultant savings.

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

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Background Information

Relationship to Policy Framework/Corporate Priorities	Aligns with the Council's Corporate Priority of 'Value for Money and Low Council Tax', together with 'Improving Health and Wellbeing of Residents', as approximately 70% of our employees are residents of Trafford. In addition, this scheme aligns with the Council's mission to make Trafford '...a great place to live, learn, work and relax'.
Financial	Whilst not the primary driver, the closure of the 3 main administrative buildings for the identified period is estimated to realise savings of c£2,700 through lower usage of utilities. There will also be

	a level of savings through reduced usage of agency staff.
Legal Implications:	None
Equality/Diversity Implications	In line with relevant legislation and good practice. Whilst the closure was over the Christmas period, this decision was based on service need only.
Sustainability Implications	None
Staffing/E-Government/Asset Management Implications	Alternative arrangements were put in place to ensure that critical services continued to be delivered during the building closure period.
Risk Management Implications	As above.
Health and Safety Implications	None

1. Introduction and Background

A decision was taken to close a number of the Council's main administrative buildings (Bowfell, Quay West, Sale Waterside and Friars Court) from Monday 24th December 2012 to Tuesday 1st January 2013 inclusive. This was reached following consultations with employees via a survey and the decision was supported by the Council's recognised Trade Unions and agreed at Employment Committee in July 2012.

It was also agreed that staff operating out of other buildings would be reduced to a minimum necessary to maintain essential services and it was estimated that the planned closures would generate savings in the region of £3,000 due to the reduced usage of gas, electricity and water.

As contingency plans were put in place, it became apparent that the closure of Bowfell would cause operational difficulties as the building was also occupied by a partner organisation requiring access to specific software that could not be accessed elsewhere. The potential savings attributed to the closure of Bowfell were minimal (c£90) and it was subsequently agreed that the building would remain open so as not to disrupt the service and to maintain relations with our partner organisation.

The Christmas Closure plans were communicated to employees via various channels and detailed that 27th and 28th December 2012 would be designated as extra-statutory days for which annual leave should be used, with staff being required to take Mondays 24th and 31st December as annual leave, flexi-time or unpaid leave. Employees were asked to have a discussion with their managers about whether they would be required to work and if not, to agree how they would take the days off and to complete the appropriate booking arrangements.

This paper details the feedback received following a review of the Christmas closure arrangements.

2. Feedback from Services

Feedback has been obtained from services, in order to understand whether any issues arose, so that we can learn from these in the event that consideration is given to future closures over this period. The key points – both positive feedback and areas for development - are as follows:

2.1 CWB

Cover arrangements with practitioners delivering essential services from alternative sites worked well. The only issue that arose was that the SAP system for adult social care went down and there was no-one available to resolve the situation. Staff coped with this well but it could have placed both customers and practitioners at risk.

2.2 CYPS

Stretford Public Hall acted as a central hub for some emergency social care services due to its facilities and accessibility for vulnerable service users. The Youth Offending Service operated out of the building over the period and Children's Social Services relocated to the building to maintain essential services.

Nearer to the closure, it became apparent that a steward was required to open and close Stretford Public Hall, to provide certainty that there would be no issues with access to the building. This was at a cost, which was met by the service. There was also an issue with the provision of cleaning services, with this being requested close to the closure date.

The MARAT service was also due to be relocated to Stretford Public Hall; however the decision was taken during the week before the closure that they would continue to operate out of Quay West as insufficient time had been allocated to address service requirements and equipment needs. There were two key issues; the first being that had staff worked out of Stretford Public Hall they would not have been able to access their referrals mail-box; the second being that when the telephone system was transferred to Stretford Public Hall, there was no facility to leave a voice message on the child protection line. This posed a risk that those contacting the service out of hours would not have been given relevant information as to whom they could contact in the case of an emergency. There had also been a potential issue about the capacity at Stretford Public Hall, due to employees who were to relocate there being on Windows 7 and the PCs being on Windows XP; however this problem was resolvable.

Records detailing the names of all employees who accessed Quay West over the 4 day period show that 14 MARAT team members and 5 Safeguarding team members worked from the building.

There were no issues with staffing levels and service provision during the closure period.

2.3 ETO

There are no critical services, which operate out of the buildings that were closed. However there was an issue, whereby further to the cleaning service for Stretford Public Hall being stood down, due the understanding that there would only be essential services across the Council, the services operating out of Stretford Public Hall requested a cleaning service close to the closure period. The cleaning service was able to agree to the request and provide appropriate cleaning provision.

2.4 EGP

The only essential service that had been identified was Housing Options, and further to the contingency arrangements being put in place, there were no issues with the provision of this service.

2.5 T&R

Sale Waterside Arts Centre

Although Sale Waterside offices were closed, the Arts Centre was open. On Thursday 27th December 2012, there was no internet connection throughout the entire Council, which impacted on the Arts Centre. The online box office system was down, so customers could not buy tickets directly. Customers who experienced this problem and phoned the box office were redirected to Ticketline's customer service line so that they could book tickets. ICT were contacted and internet connection was then restored.

Access Trafford

The Contact Centre had resourced with a skeleton staff (4 employees), advertised that it was a limited service for urgent issues and left a voice message detailing that the service was for emergencies; however, despite these actions, there was still a high demand for the service. Cofely, who provide management for the Sale Waterside building, reported that they had received complaints from members of the public who were not aware of the closure. When the service transferred some calls to services that were supposed to be manned, there was no response (adult social services). There was also still a high demand for libraries during the period.

ICT

The Christmas closure did not pose any real issues for the ICT department, although there was an outage un-related to their own equipment on Thursday 27th December 2012 that did cause some issues around connectivity. The on-call process worked well.

3. Lessons Learned

The key issues that arose were around communication and this falls into two categories. The first is around communication of the closure to service users. A press release was issued on the 17th December 2012 detailing what the service provision would be over the Christmas period; information was provided on the Council's website, an article was published in residents' magazine Your Trafford and the libraries advertised their reduced service. However, there was still a high demand for the Contact Centre and the Libraries. If there is a future closure, more consideration needs to be given to an appropriate communication strategy. One possible action would be to put an alert on the internet home page so that the change to service provision is immediately visible to anyone going on the Trafford Council website.

The second issue around communication was internal communication linked to contingency planning. In particular, services need to ensure that they have liaised with support services such as facilities management, cleaning and ICT well in advance of a closure. In addition, if there are any changes to the services planned for closure, these need to be communicated fully as they may impact on other front-line service or support services.

In terms of staffing, the Contact Centre would consider increasing the level. In addition, ICT would consider having an on-site presence if an area of the Town Hall was open.

4. Savings Achieved

4.1 Utilities

As utility bills have not yet been received for the period, the savings achieved cannot be quoted. However, the estimates are detailed below:

Building	Quay West	Sale Waterside	Friars Court	Total
Estimated savings	£377	£1,652	£655	£2,684*

*The estimate in the previous report to Employment Committee was c£3,000. The reason that the estimate quoted here is lower is that gas and water rates for Quay West are included in the rent payment and we therefore do not realise savings from a lower use of these, as the rent payment is constant. Additionally, Bowfell did not close as originally planned.

4.2 Agency spend

An analysis of agency spend was undertaken for the closure period, along with an analysis of spend the week prior and the week after to allow for a comparison.

This shows that agency spend for the two Christmas holiday weeks was £30,660 lower than for the two weeks preceding and after the Christmas closure period. Whilst it is not possible to say that the full savings are specifically as a result of the buildings closures, as agency usage should always be lower over the Christmas period with scaling down of services, it is anticipated that a significant proportion can be attributed to this initiative.

Week Ending	23rd December	30th December	6th January	13th January
Agency Spend	£33,165	£12,729	£19,595	£29,819

5. Conclusion

Although some issues arose prior to and during the closure period, there appears to have been no major impact of the 3 Council buildings being closed. Estimated savings of £2,700 from utilities usage have been achieved, in addition to a level of savings from reduced agency usage, which will contribute to the Council's savings target.

There has also been a benefit to employees getting an extended break during the Christmas period to rest and spend time with their families and staff have expressed their gratitude for this. Requiring employees to take several days of leave at a fixed time of the year is also likely to make the difficult task of managing employee leave for the rest of the year a little easier. A 'thank you' is also extended to those staff who worked over the Christmas period to maintain essential services.

By the time a future closure is considered, staff will have moved back to the refurbished Town Hall and Stretford Public Hall, Friars Court and Bowfell will have closed following the rationalisation of council buildings, so there will be different issues to consider. Consideration would have to be given as to whether a full closure of the Town Hall is practical, or whether certain areas will have to remain open to act as a hub for critical services.

Employment Committee is recommended to note the findings and lessons learned, together with the resultant savings.