

Policy and Finance Committee

Date: 25 July 2022

Title: Consultation response: Accessing Central Bedfordshire Council services in the Dunstable area

Purpose of the Report:

To advise committee of a current consultation being undertaken by Central Bedfordshire Council and to consider whether to submit a formal response.

Contact Officer:

Sarah Sandiford, Deputy Town Clerk

Corporate Objective/s	LLTC Five Year Plan –	
Implications:		
Financial	No	
Human Resources	Yes	CBC queries currently impact on workload for Town Council staff.
Operational/Service delivery	Yes	CBC queries currently impact on workload for Town Council staff.
Procedural/Legal	No	
Risk/Health and Safety	No	
Environmental Aims	No	
Equalities	Yes	To consider potential for digital exclusion or disadvantage to residents.

1 RECOMMENDATION/S

Should members be minded, the proposals are:

- 1.1 To consider a possible formal Town Council response to the current Central Bedfordshire Council consultation on accessing services in the Dunstable area, as set out in paragraph 3.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The attached consultation document from Central Bedfordshire Council sets out proposals for future provision of services from Watling House, Dunstable.

- 2.2 Historically, Watling House has provided a facility for face-to-face customer service contact with Central Bedfordshire Council for residents in the south of the administrative area. Queries might relate to any area for which the authority is responsible, including for example: housing, council tax, social services.
- 2.3 Locally, there was a customer service presence in Bossard House until 2018, when provision moved to the Leighton Buzzard Library on a part time basis. Prior to the Covid pandemic, customer service staff were available for limited hours twice a week in the Library.
- 2.4 Since the start of the pandemic until the present time, there has been no face to face customer service provision.
- 2.5 The Town Council has always been approached by members of the public wishing to access Central Bedfordshire services. This is often due to a lack of understanding about which councils are responsible for which areas and this is something we seek to address on an ongoing basis via social media and the About Town newsletter. However, the other reason for approaches by residents is simply that they know they can speak to a person on site.
- 2.6 Surveys undertaken in summer 2016 and again in January 2020 both indicated that around 10% of customer contacts handled by the Town Council are for Central Bedfordshire matters.
- 2.7 A current survey commenced in May 2022 to date shows that 31 residents have come into the White House in the last six weeks. Whilst not a high number, averaging 5 per week or 1 per day, this demonstrates an ongoing demand. Anecdotal feedback from the Central Services team indicates that the majority of walk-ins are residents who are unable to use technology to access council services online.
- 2.8 Resident queries have been on subjects including: bus passes (9), disabled parking permits (1), waste and environment (4), housing (4), benefits (1), trees (1), highways (3), parking (1), planning (1), council tax (1), schools (1) and support for refugees from Ukraine (4).
- 2.9 Town Council staff are in the unenviable position of being unable to signpost residents to any local point where they can speak to a representative of Central Bedfordshire Council and this is often a difficult message to convey.
- 2.10 In addition, the introduction of an automated telephone answering system highlighting the areas for which Central Bedfordshire Council is responsible took place when the Town Council replaced its telephone system earlier this year. Call statistics demonstrate a consistent one-third of calls dropping out of the system after this message, indicating again the confusion over which council to contact for which service.

3 CONCLUSIONS

- 3.1 The Town Council is aware from its own evidence gathering that digital exclusion is an issue for some residents, particularly those who are older or vulnerable. Whilst the convenience and cost-effectiveness of online/telephone based services is evident across the country, the fact remains that some residents are disadvantaged by this change in approach. The Town Council has recognised this issue with its investment into the technical support helpline and “community agent” initiative.
- 3.2 The current lack of provision for face to face customer service contact for residents with representatives of Central Bedfordshire Council can prove frustrating or distressing. It also represents a difficulty for Town Council staff in trying to placate, advise or assist residents on matters which the Town Council is not responsible.
- 3.3 Based on the evidence above, the committee is asked to consider a formal response to the current consultation suggesting that some form of in-person customer service point should be provided in Leighton Buzzard, even if for limited days/times.
- 3.4 Although evidence points to a need in relation to customer service, housing and tax & benefits and the Town Council has collected no evidence regarding need for social services or children’s services, the committee may wish to consider how these services should be accessed.
- 3.5 Leighton Buzzard registrar services can currently be accessed in the Leighton Buzzard Library on Tuesdays and Thursdays, by appointment and no change is proposed in the consultation.
- 3.6 Committee may also wish to make comment or recommendations relating to ensuring clear information is available to residents regarding Central Bedfordshire responsibilities and how services can be accessed – including for those residents unable to access information online.

End.