



# City of Westminster Cabinet Member Report

<b>Decision Maker:</b>	Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Regeneration
<b>Date:</b>	16 December 2020
<b>Classification:</b>	General Release
<b>Title:</b>	Realignment of Claimant Contact Facilities for the Council's Benefits service
<b>Wards Affected:</b>	All
<b>Key Decision:</b>	No
<b>Financial Summary:</b>	<p>The closure of the Orchardson Street Benefit Site will deliver contract savings of £127K per annum within the Revenues &amp; Benefits service. This will be offset by a reduction in Corporate Property rental income of the same value. There will however be an overall future financial saving due to the Orchardson Street site being available for other Councils services to move in to and therefore releasing capital / revenue savings relating to their existing sites. There will additionally be a relatively small shared contract saving relating to reduced contractor staffing costs per annum and a shared small redundancy cost in the first year.</p>
<b>Report of:</b>	<b>Martin Hinckley</b> <b>Director of Revenues &amp; Benefits</b>

## 1. Summary

- 1.1 The current pandemic has required the council to realign the contact facilities available to the borough's benefit claimants, primarily due to the need to close the Council's two benefit reception sites in March 2020. The Council implemented alternative arrangements at the commencement of the pandemic to try to ensure that the level of service to the borough's claimants was not reduced whilst the reception sites were closed. These arrangements have worked very well and it is considered that the new arrangement should become permanent, which in turn will mean that the Council no longer requires both benefit reception sites.

1.2 This report considers the option to permanently close the Orchardson Street benefits reception site, whilst the Vauxhall Bridge Road reception site will become the single benefits reception site in the borough.

## 2. Recommendation

2.1 That the Orchardson Street benefit reception site is not re-opened and the property is vacated by the Benefits service to enable other Council services to move into the building.

## 3. Reasons for Decision

3.1 The recommendation in this report is made as it has been proved over the last nine months during the pandemic that the Council can provide the service in a different way. The various alternatives to face to face contact during this period have proved successful with no reduction in customer service to the borough's claimants. These methods of contact include via the telephone, webchat, e-mail, on-line forms, white mail and the Council's Benefits visiting service. In addition, in the future the Vauxhall Bridge Road Benefit reception site will re-open when it is considered safe to do so.

3.2 The realignment of the customer contact facilities available for Benefits service claimants following the experience of the current pandemic will also produce some medium-term savings as other external buildings are vacated and released by other Council services.

## 4. Background

4.1 The Revenues & Benefits contract includes a requirement on the contractor to provide a benefit reception site in the north of the borough (Orchardson Street) and in the south of the borough (Vauxhall Bridge Road). The contractor has entered a lease with a private landlord for the Vauxhall Bridge Road site, whilst the Orchardson Street is rented by the contractor from the Council's Corporate Property team.

4.2 The Benefit reception sites previously (before the pandemic) provided the following main services:-

- Self-service PCs with assisted self-serve and scanning facility
- General advice, including how to claim Universal Credit, and document drop-off
- Interviews via pre-arranged appointments
- Copying / scanning facilities for supporting evidence

- 4.3 The reception sites were both closed at the start of the pandemic. At that time the Benefits service implemented a number of changes to try and ensure that the service provided to the borough's claimants was not reduced. This included
- Relaxed verification requirements informed by the DWP's 'Trust and Protect' initiative
  - Outbound telephone call support provided to customers who have difficulty in completing the form or need assistance with complex issues.
  - Arrangements put in place for hard copy forms to be issued if the customer has no online access
  - Covid-19 compliant procedures to allow the uninterrupted processing of white mail including the transfer of any correspondence received at the closed sites
  - Signposting to alternative methods of contact including Contact Centre, Online Forms and Email
  - Updates to the Council's website to inform Customers of the reception closures and removal of details on correspondence
  - Implementing an online claim process for discretionary housing payments (DHPs)
  - Development on an Online Evidence Upload form (awaiting imminent deployment on the council's Website).
  - Copies/photographs of documents can be submitted via email/post.
- 4.4 The new processes which were put in place have worked very well, with no discernible issues having arisen. It is considered that these new arrangements should become permanent, which in turn means that there is no requirement for the Council to maintain both reception sites.
- 4.5 The Vauxhall Bridge Road benefit reception site is subject to a long-term rental agreement between the contractor and a private landlord in line with the current contractual requirement to provide two reception sites until the end of the current contract (30/11/2025– subject to a potential three-year extension).
- 4.6 The Orchardson Street site is a Corporate Property site and as such offers the Council the option to close the site. The Benefit service has fairly recently moved its floor area within the building after a request from the Council's Corporate Property service in order to assist with the decanting of other services. A new lease was drafted to reflect the new reduced floor area, although this is currently on-hold due to the proposal outlined in this report.

## 5. The Proposal

5.1 It is proposed that the Orchardson Street Benefit Reception site is not re-opened and that the Vauxhall Bridge Road site when re-opened becomes a Benefits reception site for the whole borough.

5.2 The proposal is based on the following:-

- The alternative arrangements (as outlined section 4.3) which were put in place at the start of the pandemic have proved successful and should now be made permanent.
  - The following alternative contact facilities are in place to address claimant queries
    - **Telephone service** – the service has been fully supported by home working agents during the pandemic and is available between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.
    - **Webchat** – provided the Benefits contact centre
    - **E-mail / white mail**
    - **On-line forms**
    - **Visiting service** – This is a service that is available to vulnerable claimants who need personal face to face assistance (subject to suitable risk assessments). Alternatively individual appointments with benefit officers could be made available at other council buildings, such as at local libraries
    - **Benefit reception site** -The Vauxhall Bridge Road benefit reception site will be re-opened once allowed by the Covid restrictions. The transport links to the site are good, allowing access from all parts of the borough.
  - The proposal will provide contract savings of £127K within the Revenues & Benefits contract, although this is offset by a reduction in the rental income received by the Council's Corporate Property team. The vacation of the Benefits service from the Orchardson Street will free-up space for other services to move into and therefore will release other buildings, which in turn will deliver capital and revenue financial benefits in relation to the properties being vacated. Subject to this report being agreed, the area currently occupied by the Benefits Service within Orchardson Street is likely to be needed by another Service who are currently considering their space requirements.
  - The proposal will reduce the risks associated with face to face contact going forward.
- 5.3 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) was undertaken and the outcome of the assessment is shown at Appendix A.

## **6. Property Implications**

- 6.1 As part of the current refurbishment works at Orchardson Street, Capita were consolidated into the ground floor of Orchardson Street, having previously occupied space within Orchardson on both the first floor and second floors under both original lease and more laterally by way of tenancy at will under a previous commissioned contract. Both parties have agreed in principle and acknowledge the implied lease that had been drawn up and not completed, including agreement on the fully inclusive rent, which runs from the start date of the now implied lease being 9<sup>th</sup> December 2019 up until the deemed final date of occupation and now notional termination date under the implied lease being the 30<sup>th</sup> November 2020. The relevant property estates teams of both Capita and WCC are agreed in principal that a formal retrospective lease completion exercise is not now required, the mere transfer of funds for deemed rent will suffice in the present circumstances (rent has been paid by Capita).
- 6.2 The vacation of these premises by Capita will leave the building vacant for reuse by other services in support of the Corporate Property review of premises being undertaken as part of the City for All Delivery Plan. It is expected that another council service will require the area currently occupied by the Benefits Service once it becomes vacant, following internal consultation and approvals
- 6.3 The closure of the Benefits service benefit reception site will result as a loss of rental income of £127K per annum for Corporate Property but will allow other Council services to move into the Orchardson Street site, therefore providing overall future savings for the Council in terms of capital and revenue.
- 6.4 It is proposed that the savings in the first year are reduced by £17.5K to reflect 50% of the estimated redundancy costs that the contractor will incur in making 2 members of the current Orchardson Street staffing redundant. The saving in on-going staffing costs will also be shared between the council and the contractor, which will equate to a relatively small saving of £25K per annum. The remaining three members of staff will be redeployed to support alternative contact facilities for the borough's claimants (including the telephone service, visiting service and to the Vauxhall Bridge Road site).

## **7. Financial Implications**

- 7.1 The financial implications are as outlined elsewhere in this report.

## **8. Legal Implications**

- 8.1 The legal implications are as outlined elsewhere within this report.

## **9. Ward Member Comments**

- 9.1 As this report relates to claimants in all wards, no Ward Member consultation was required.

## **10. Consultation**

- 10.1 It is considered that a consultation exercise with the council's benefit claimants is not required, as there is no statutory requirement for a consultation exercise and the alternative claimant contact facilities proposed in this report have been in place for the whole period that the Orchardson Street has been shut due to the pandemic (i.e. the last 9 months).

## **11. Outstanding Issues**

- 11.1 There are no outstanding issues.

**If you have any queries about this report, please contact: Martin Hinckley, on  
07816 215828 or via email to**

**[mhinckley@westminster.gov.uk](mailto:mhinckley@westminster.gov.uk)**

## **APPENDIX A – Equality Impact Assessment**

For completion by the **Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Regeneration**

**Declaration of Interest**

I have <no interest to declare / to declare an interest> in respect of this report

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
**Councillor Melvyn Caplan, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Regeneration**  
NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

State nature of interest if any .....

.....  
*(N.B: If you have an interest you should seek advice as to whether it is appropriate to make a decision in relation to this matter)*

For the reasons set out above, I agree the recommendations in the report entitled **Realignment of Claimant Contact Facilities for the Council’s Benefits service** and reject any alternative options which are referred to but not recommended.

Signed: Councillor Melvyn Caplan, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Regeneration

Date .....

If you have any additional comment which you would want actioned in connection with your decision you should discuss this with the report author and then set out your comment below before the report and this pro-forma is returned to the Secretariat for processing.

Additional comment:  
.....  
.....

If you do not wish to approve the recommendations, or wish to make an alternative decision, it is important that you consult the report author, the Director of Law,, the Executive Director of Finance and Resources and, if there are staffing implications, the Director of People Services (or their representatives) so that (1) you can be made aware of any further relevant considerations that you should take into account before making the decision and (2) your reasons for the decision can be properly identified and recorded, as required by law.

Note to Cabinet Member: Your decision will now be published and copied to the Members of the relevant Policy and Scrutiny Committee. If the decision falls within the criteria for call-in, it will not be implemented until five working days have elapsed from publication to allow the Policy and Scrutiny Committee to decide whether it wishes to call the matter in.