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<b>Subject:</b>	<b>CLOSURE OF AREA OFFICES</b>
<b>Meeting and Date:</b>	<b>Cabinet – 3 July 2017</b> <b>Scrutiny (Policy and Performance) Committee – 11 July 2017</b>
<b>Report of:</b>	<b>Andrew Stevens, Assistant Director, EK Services</b>
<b>Portfolio Holder:</b>	<b>Councillor Mike Conolly, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources and Performance</b>
<b>Decision Type:</b>	<b>Key</b>
<b>Classification:</b>	<b>Unrestricted</b>

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**Purpose of the report:** To withdraw DDC face to face customer services at Aylesham, Sandwich and Deal and close the DDC service desks at these locations.

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**Recommendation:** To withdraw face to face customer services at Aylesham, Sandwich and Deal and the closure of the DDC service desks at these locations during 2017/18

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## 1. Summary

1.1 This report seeks approval to withdraw face to face customer services at the DDC area offices (Aylesham, Sandwich and Deal) during 2017/18. Overall, footfall is reducing as more and more people are choosing to contact us by telephone or online. We have gathered an advanced level of customer insight and research which has been pivotal in bringing us to this point of questioning the need for face to face customer service at these offices. Withdrawing face to face service at these offices will progress the Council's digitisation agenda, enable EKS to continue to develop its services and help EK Services to meet its challenging budget savings targets for 2017/18.

## 2. Introduction and Background

2.1 DDC have provided a face to face customer service at Aylesham, Sandwich and Deal for many years. Staff at these offices deal with a variety of transactions for the council such as benefits, Council Tax and parking. Despite vastly increasing numbers of people choosing to contact us by other means (telephone and online) the design of the face to face service hasn't adapted or changed to meet customers' expectations. We still offer a very traditional service at these offices where customers can turn up without an appointment and wait to be seen. Other organisations who also deal with our customers have moved away from face to face services due to their cost and strategy to move customers online (Pension Service, Jobcentres, utility companies etc). Pensioners who claim pension credit carry out all their transactions online, by phone or by post. An Equality Impact Assessment is included as Appendix 5.

2.2 There are rarely queues in these offices and the sheer conveniences of the facilities are causing much of the footfall even though many of the enquiries can be dealt with in other ways.

2.3 EK Services staff have been gathering and analysing an advanced level of customer information over the last 12 months. We have spent a lot of time with the customers at all of these offices finding more about why they are choosing to come in face to

face to deal with the council, who they are (age, disability status, sex, how far they have travelled to come in) as well as whether they have access to the internet at home or elsewhere and whether they are confident in using it or not. EKS "Digital Champions" have also spent time at these offices helping customers to access the services in other ways and raising awareness of online and telephone services. Customer reaction to this has been very positive.

- 2.4 Most of the transaction types at Aylesham, Sandwich and Deal can be dealt with in other, more cost-effective, ways. At most of our offices, most of the transactions are about housing benefit. EK Services are procuring a new digital benefits system which allows people to submit new claims and change of circumstances 24/7 as well as upload documents directly to their claim. This negates the need for people to bring documents to the office to be copied (which is a very common transaction type) For exceptional cases only there is a provision to visit people in their own homes to help them transact with the council. This will be adopted on a case by case basis and only in cases where there is no other assistance available.
- 2.5 Universal Credit is just about to roll out in the Dover district. We will monitor the roll out of this before closure to ensure there are no new issues arising that were not identified in the production of this report. If any new issues are identified then these would be fully considered before closure proceeds.
- 2.6 Given the above, we are now in a situation where we recommend closing face to face customer service at Aylesham, Sandwich and Deal during 2017/18. Exact dates to be confirmed but we would recommend closing Aylesham & Sandwich in September and Deal in October 2017. Customers will still be able to make their enquiries to the council but will do so in a more modern, convenient and cost effective way. Similar recommendations are being made to Canterbury & Thanet Councils in relation to their area offices as well. This will have the dual advantage of helping deliver our services in a way that the majority of our customers expect as well as helping EK Services achieve its savings targets for 2017/18.
- 2.7 To be clear, the proposal is only to close the DDC service desks at these locations. The principal use of these buildings as a library (Deal), health centre (Aylesham) etc will continue.

### 3. **Identification of Options**

- 3.1 Withdraw face to face service at Aylesham, Sandwich and Deal - This withdrawal will happen during 2017/18 and customers will be encouraged to transact with us either on the telephone or online. Customers who are currently bringing in documents will be encouraged to either upload them online if they have access or post them to us as they do with many other organisations they deal with.
- 3.2 Do not withdraw face to face services at Aylesham, Sandwich and Deal – This will hamper EK Services and DDC's digital ambitions and make it much more difficult for EK Services to realise its savings targets for 17/18. Increasingly, face to face service is becoming more expensive per transaction as we maintain the same number of staff in the offices whilst the footfall is falling. We have 1 staff member at Aylesham, 1 at Sandwich and 2 at Deal.

### 4. **Evaluation of Options**

- 4.1 Withdraw face to face services at Aylesham, Sandwich and Deal – This option is recommended. Given all the customer insight work and research we have carried

out over the last 12 months we now have a better understanding than ever before about the customers who are visiting our offices. We know who they are, how far they have travelled, their ages, sex, disability status and, crucially, we know the reasons why they have chosen face to face over other channels such as online and telephone. We also have data on their levels of digital literacy and whether they have access to the internet. This research has challenged the traditional assumptions that the main users of face to face services are the elderly who have not got access to the internet at home and who are digitally excluded. We have found that many people of working age who are digitally literate and have access to the internet are still choosing to use face to face services due to convenience and/or perceptions of a speedy service. There have also been cases where customers were simply not aware of the option of an online service and greatly appreciated being shown how to do this as an alternative to travelling to an office to hand documents in for example. All of the transaction types that happen in these offices can be carried out by customers using other channels such as online or telephone. If implemented then the DDC service desks at Aylesham, Deal and Sandwich will close.

4.2 If approved officers of the District Council and EK Services will determine the arrangements and timing for the closure of the area offices at Aylesham, Sandwich and Deal in accordance with the mechanisms and officer delegations in the East Kent Services Collaboration Agreement.

4.3 Do not withdraw face to face services at Aylesham, Sandwich and Deal – This option is not recommended. We have an obligation to provide services in a manner preferred by the majority of our customers whilst making sure the minority who do not have internet access have alternative ways of dealing with us. If we do not withdraw face to face services at these offices customers will still choose to use them (albeit a reducing number) and we will still need to resource them which will act as a significant barrier to EK Services and DDC's digital ambitions as well as make it more difficult for EKS to attain its budget savings target.

## 5. **Resource Implications**

There will be part year savings of £22.5k in 2017/18 (assuming full implementation by 1<sup>st</sup> October 2017) and then on-going savings of £45k per annum in subsequent years.

## 6. **Corporate Implications**

6.1 Comment from the Section 151 Officer: The Section 151 Officer and the Accountancy Section have been consulted on the report and have no further comments to add (LS)

6.2 Comment from the Solicitor to the Council: The Solicitor to the Council has been consulted in the preparation of this report and has no further comments to make.

6.3 Comment from the Equalities Officer: In preparation for the report an Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out which highlights an impact on both age and disability. Measures have been outlined in order to mitigate the impact on the protected characteristics. Members are reminded that, in discharging their responsibilities they are required to comply with the public sector equality duty as set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15>

7. **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Customer insight data at Aylesham

Appendix 2 – Customer insight data at Sandwich

Appendix 3 – Customer insight data at Deal

Appendix 4 – ONS national statistics (internet access per age band)

Appendix 5 – Equality Impact Assessment

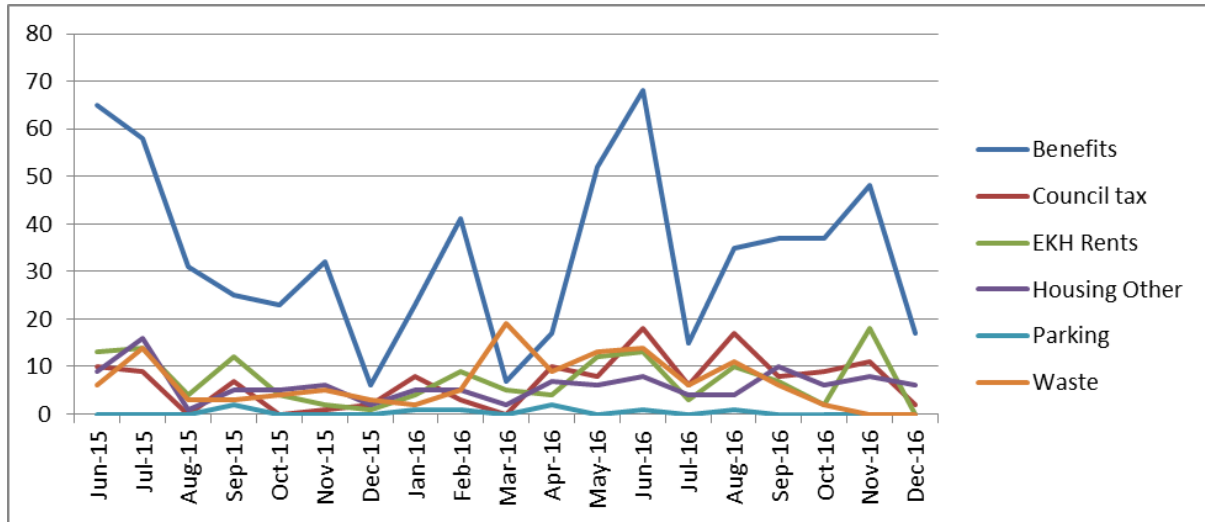
8. **Background Papers**

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## Appendix 1 – Aylesham data and customer insight

- Visitor numbers at Aylesham (June 15 to Dec 16)



- Results from customer surveys (49 completed)

“Average” Aylesham customer is a female aged over 65, travels 0.8 miles to come into the office to hand in documents and has a 50% chance of possessing a smartphone and/or having access to the internet.

What is your postcode?  
CT3 3DL

What is your age?  
 16-24  25-34  35-44  45-54   
 55-64  65-74  75+  (please circle)

Are you:  
 Male  Female  (please circle)

Do you consider yourself to have a disability?  
 Yes  No  (please circle)

Can you use a computer/smart-phone/tablet?  
 Yes  No (please circle)

Does anyone in your house use a computer/smart-phone/tablet?  
 Yes  No (please circle)

Do you have access to a computer/smart-phone/tablet at home?  
 Yes  No (please circle)

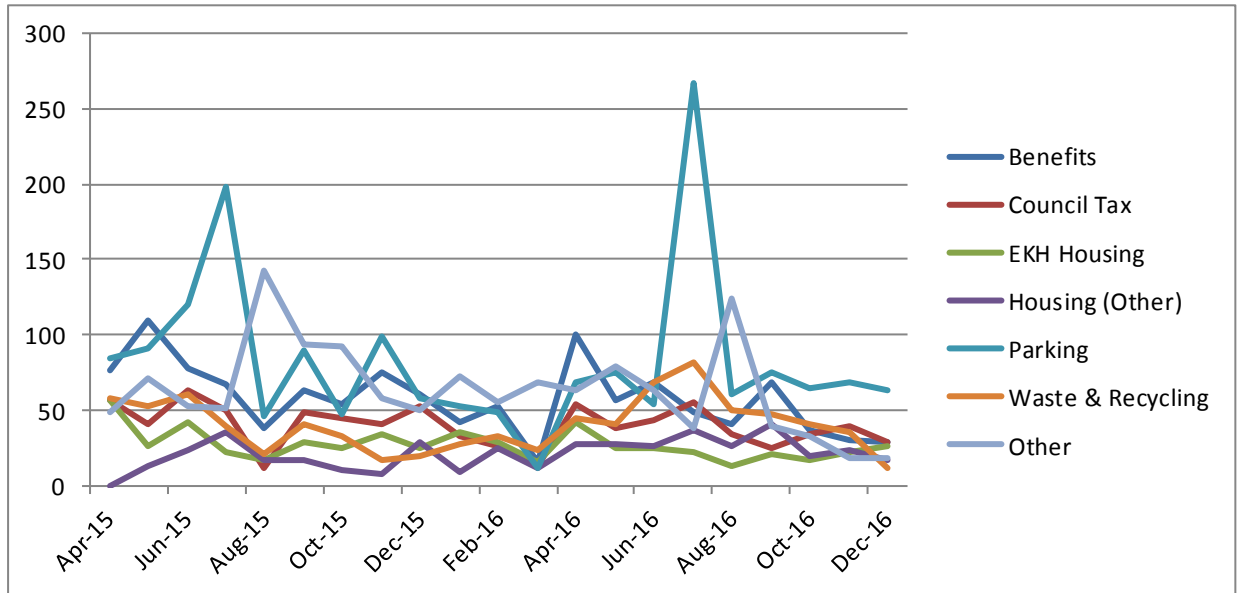
Do you have access to a computer at a library, council office or similar?  
 Yes  No (please circle)

Why did you visit today instead of going online or phoning?  
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## Appendix 2 – Sandwich data and customer insight

- Visitor numbers at Sandwich (April 15 to Dec 16)



- Results from customer surveys (155 completed)

“Average” Sandwich customer is aged over 75, travels 2.1 miles to come into the office to pay a council bill or ask about parking and has just over a 50% chance of possessing a smartphone and/or having access to the internet.

What is your postcode?

What is your age?  
 16-24 25-34 35-44 45-54  
 55-64 65-74 75+ (please circle)

Are you:  
 Male  Female  (please circle)

Do you consider yourself to have a disability?  
 Yes  No  (please circle)

Can you use a computer/smart-phone/tablet?  
 Yes  No  (please circle)

Does anyone in your house use a computer/smart-phone/tablet?  
 Yes  No (please circle)

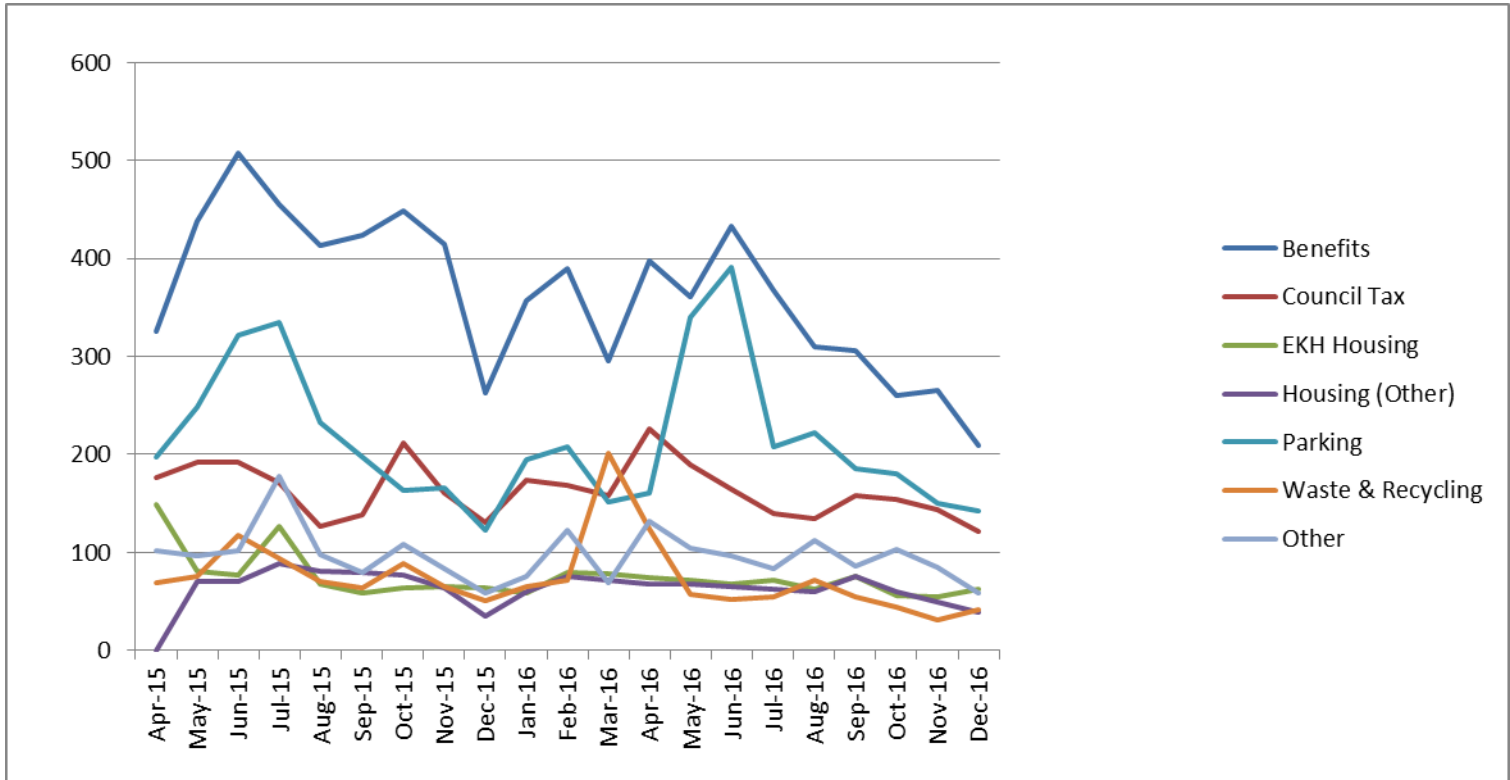
Do you have access to a computer/smart-phone/tablet at home?  
 Yes  No  (please circle)

Do you have access to a computer at a library, council office or similar?  
 Yes  No  (please circle)

Why did you visit today instead of going online or phoning?

### Appendix 3 – Deal data and customer insight

- Visitor numbers at Deal (June 15 to Dec 16)



- Results from customer surveys (384 completed)

“Average” Deal customer is aged between 45-54, travels 2.13 miles to come into the office to hand in documents. They are likely to possess a smart phone / access to the internet.

What is your postcode?

What is your age?  
 16-24 (25-34) 35-44 45-54  
 55-64 65-74 75+ (please circle)

Are you:  
 Male Female (please circle)

Do you consider yourself to have a disability?  
 Yes No (please circle)

Can you use a computer/smart-phone/tablet?  
 Yes No (please circle)

Does anyone in your house use a computer/smart-phone/tablet?  
 Yes No (please circle)

Do you have access to a computer/smart-phone/tablet at home?  
 Yes No (please circle)

Do you have access to a computer at a library, council office or similar?  
 Yes No (please circle)

Why did you visit today instead of going online or phoning?



Appendix 4 – National internet access statistics (ONS)

# ONS Internet stats 2016

Figure 3: Recent internet users in last 3 months by age group and sex, UK, 2016

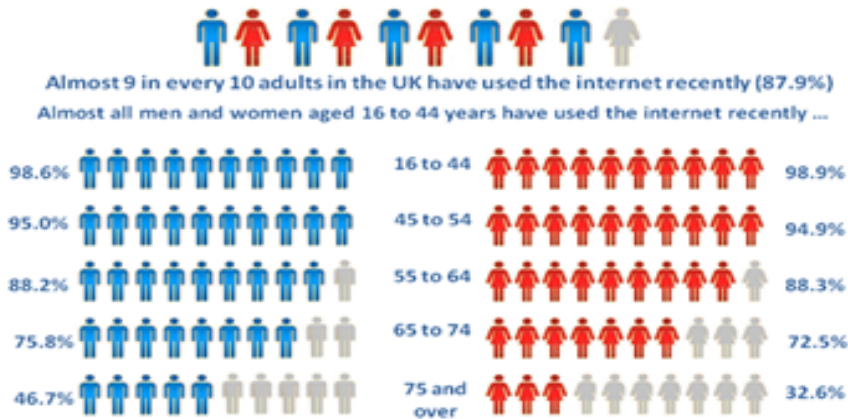
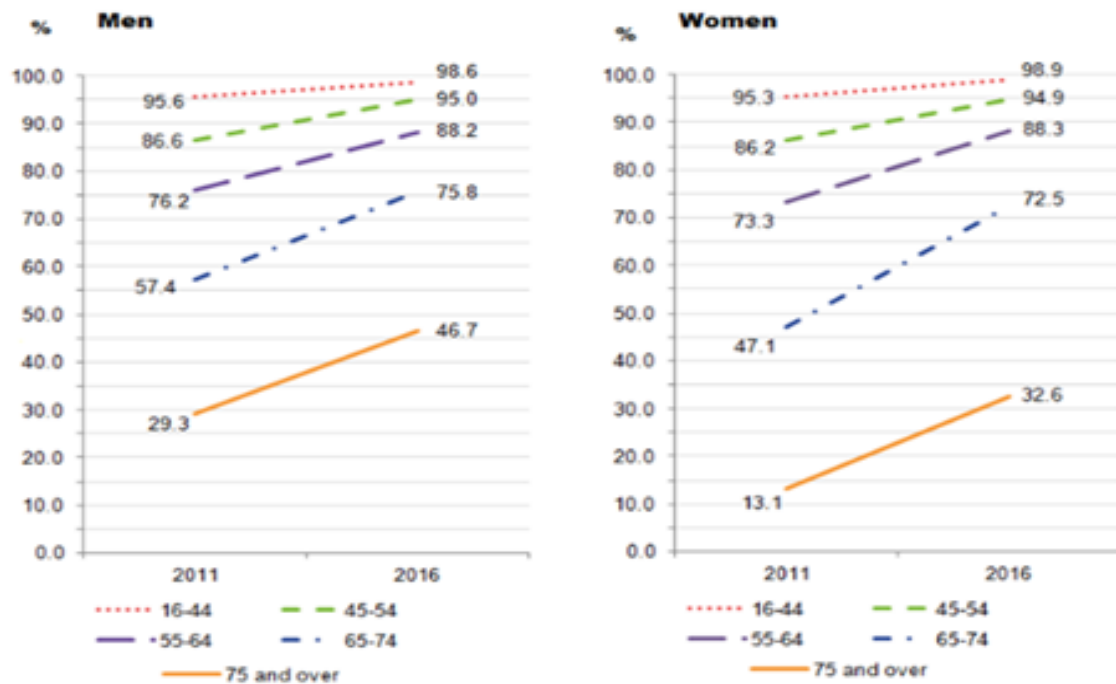


Figure 4: Recent internet use in 2011 and 2016 by age group and sex, UK





## **Appendix 5 – Equality Impact Assessment**

Equalities Impact Assessment

<b>Lead Officer:-</b>	Andrew Stevens, Assistant Director, EK Services
<b>Decision Maker(s):-</b>	Cabinet – 3 <sup>rd</sup> July 2017
<b>Name and Type of decision:-</b>  e.g. Policy, contract, service delivery change.	Service delivery change. The reports recommends that face to face customer service is withdrawn from Aylesham, Sandwich and Deal.
<b>Date of decision</b>  When will the final decision be taken?	3 <sup>rd</sup> July 2017.
<b>Aims of the decision</b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectives</li> <li>• Intended outcomes</li> <li>• Key actions</li> <li>• Who and how many will be affected</li> </ul>	<p>The objectives of the decision are to withdraw face to face customer service at Aylesham, Sandwich and Deal. Although face to face service will be withdrawn we still intend to offer a comprehensive service on the telephone and online. The intended outcome is for customers to interact with us in a more cost effective way as face to face service provision carries significantly higher overheads than dealing with people on the telephone or online.</p> <p>The key actions are to seek approval in principle from Cabinet on 8<sup>th</sup> May 2017 and then embark on a communications campaign to publicise the closures. It is anticipated that the face to face service will be withdrawn by July 2017.</p> <p>In terms of numbers of people affected, the numbers of customers using these offices varies from month to month but we generally see about 10 customers a week at Aylesham, 75 at Sandwich and around 220 customers at Deal. We don't know how many of these customers are "unique" customers and how many are repeat customers.</p>

<p><b>Information and Research</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summarise research and information that you used to prepare your proposals / preferred options</li> <li>• What data did you use to research your proposals</li> <li>• List anything you found that will affect people with protected characteristics.</li> </ul>	<p>We have been collecting a great deal of data and information on customers using our face to face services over the last 12 months. This has been using feedback cards and we have collected information regarding age, sex, distance travelled, disability status and whether the customer is digitally literate or not and had access to the internet. Across the three locations we have collected over 600 survey forms which have subsequently informed these recommendations.</p> <p>These survey forms have been accompanied by EKS “Digital Champions” spending time in these offices talking to the customers about how they prefer to contact the office and helping them deal with the council in a different way. These sessions have been very positively received and a special “Go online” session held at Aylesham was very well received by the public.</p> <p>Generally speaking, we have found that Aylesham and Sandwich are used by older people (over 65) and Deal is mostly used by people aged between 45-54. A minority of people using face to face at these offices consider themselves to be disabled. Most of the customers we surveyed are female and around 50% of customers at Aylesham and Sandwich told us they have internet access compared to around 75% at Deal. We have also carried out research looking at other similar organisations who provide services to our customers. For older people in particular anyone dealing with the Pension Service would be expected to interact with them online or by telephone. Documents can be posted to them as well. HMRC also encourage this type of contact rather than face to face. Utility companies such as water, gas and electricity companies offer no face to face services either.</p>
<p><b>Consultation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has there been any specific consultation done</li> <li>• What were the consultation results</li> <li>• Did the consultation analysis show any difference for people with protected characteristics.</li> <li>• What conclusions did you draw from the consultation</li> </ul>	<p>There has been significant consultation through a process of discussions and surveys with over 600 users of the face to face service to build up a detailed understanding of who are customers are and to find out why they were choosing to contact us face to face rather than use more modern, cost effective ways of contacting us.</p>

**Assessing if the decision is likely to be relevant to the three aims of the Equality Duty.**

<b>Aim</b>	<b>Relevance Yes / No</b>
Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation	No
Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not.	Yes
Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.	No

**If you have decided that this decision is relevant to the three aims of the Equality Duty, use the section below to show how it is relevant and what the impact will be.**

<b>Protected Characteristic</b>	<b>Relevance High/Medium/Low</b>	<b>Impact of the decision Positive / Negative</b>
Age	Medium	Negative.
Disability	Medium	Neutral
Gender reassignment		
Gender		
Marriage and Civil Partnership		
Pregnancy and Maternity		
Race		
Religion, Belief or Lack of Belief		
Sexual Orientation		

<p>If you have found negative impact, outline the measures you intend to take to mitigate it.</p>	<p>National ONS data reveals that older people are less likely to have access to the internet than younger people. Withdrawing the face to face customer service will not disadvantage older people as we will still provide a telephone service for enquiries and customers always have the opportunity to upload documents on their phone if they have the facility and access or post documents where they do not. This is entirely consistent with other organisations such as Pension Service and HMRC who are also encouraging customers to interact with them in a more modern, cost effective way.</p> <p>In terms of disability, again, statistics show disabled people are less likely to have internet access than non-disabled people. The mitigating factors mentioned above remain applicable. We will offer a full digital service for those who have got access to the internet and a telephone service for those who do not. As many of the transaction types we deal with are customers simply bringing in documents for us to see we will of course accept these via the postal system like many other organisations they already deal with.</p>
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	<p>For exceptional cases only there is a provision to visit people in their own homes to help them interact with the council. This will be adopted on a case by case basis and will only be carried out where there is no other help available to the customer.</p>
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This Equality Impact Assessment must attach to any report throughout the decision making process, to allow the final decision makers to have Due Regard.