

## CABINET

<b>Date of Meeting</b>	Tuesday, 20 <sup>th</sup> June 2023
<b>Report Subject</b>	Flintshire Connects Annual Report 2022-23
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	Cabinet Member for Governance and Corporate Services including Health and Safety and Human Resources
<b>Report Author</b>	Chief Officer (Governance)
<b>Type of Report</b>	Operational

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an overview of the annual performance of Flintshire Connects, the service responsible for providing face to face and digital access to Council services during financial year 2022/23.

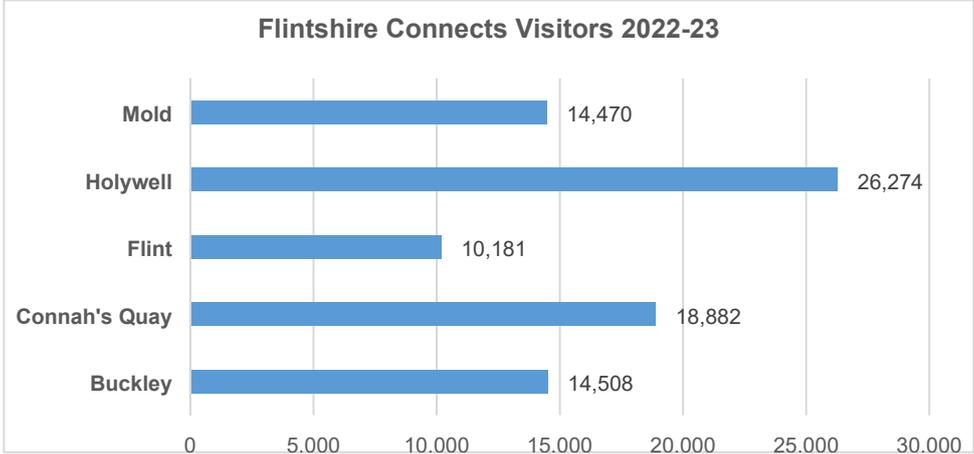
As part of the Council's business planning process, Flintshire Connects completed a review of vacancies in 2022/23 which led to a £60,000 efficiency at the same time avoiding any redundancies. This report describes the impact of this saving on the service.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

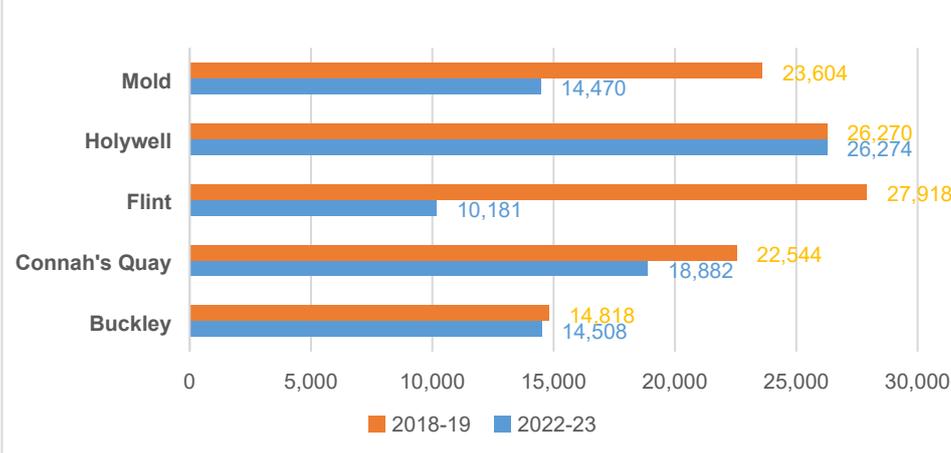
1.	Cabinet notes Flintshire Connects annual performance 2022/23.
2.	Cabinet notes the historic change to opening hours at Buckley and Mold resulting in part-time opening hours at both Centres (paragraph 1.04).
3.	Cabinet approves an increase to opening hours at Buckley Connects Centre (one additional day) to give parity with Mold, which will take effect when all new employees are trained.
4.	Cabinet supports the priorities for the service (paragraph 1.23).

## REPORT DETAILS

<b>1.00</b>	<b>FLINTSHIRE CONNECTS ANNUAL PERFORMANCE 2022/23</b>
1.01	<b>Background</b> Flintshire Connects is delivered in partnership with Aura, Job Centre Plus and North Wales Police. There are five Connects Centres across the County providing face to face support for vulnerable customers who need assistance to access services as well as those who need support to access services online. Connects Centres are in Buckley, Connah's Quay, Flint, Holywell, and Mold.
1.02	Flintshire Connects is integral to the Council's Customer and Digital Strategies in terms of providing high quality, accessible, responsive, and cost-effective public services. Customers can access a range of services at Connects Centres and a number of those are statutory e.g. Blue Badges, Social Housing, Homelessness, Revenues and Benefits. Flintshire Connects also supports digitally excluded customers, helping them to embrace digital technology by providing advice and support to increase their confidence to use digital technology as a way of contacting the Council and third sector organisations.
1.03	The Flintshire Connects service has been aligned to the Governance portfolio since 2018/19 and over recent years has achieved efficiencies of £76,000 through a restructure and revised opening hours. More recently at the end of 2022/23 a £60,000 efficiency was put forward by the service to help close the funding gap for 2023/24. This recent efficiency has been achieved by vacancy management and a reduction in the opening hours at Buckley and Mold.
1.04	Following a reduction in FTE at the end of 2022/23, Flintshire Connects now employ 9.9 FTE Customer Service Advisors and one Team Leader to resolve customer enquiries at first point of contact thus reducing duplication, releasing back-office efficiencies, and improving the service for customers. The Connects Centres are open: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Buckley: Tuesday and Thursday 9am until 4:30pm</li><li>• Connah's Quay: Monday to Friday 9am until 4:30pm</li><li>• Flint: Monday to Friday 9am until 4:30pm</li><li>• Holywell: Monday to Friday 9am until 4:30pm</li><li>• Mold: Monday, Wednesday and Friday 9am until 4:30pm</li></ul>
1.05	<b>2022/23 Service Challenges</b>  As with many services Flintshire Connects has faced significant staffing challenges over the last twelve months. During 2022/23 eight employees left, three left the Council and five gained promotions to other areas of the Council. With vacancies running at over 50% at times, the service could not continue to operate full-time hours across all five Centres.
1.06	In October 2022, Buckley and Mold Connects Centres reduced their opening hours on a temporary basis, alternating days between the two

	Centres. In February the decision to retain the changes on a permanent basis was made to as part of the annual budget process.												
1.07	Connah's Quay and Flint Connects Centres experienced intermittent disruption to opening hours towards the end of 2022 before the opening hours were temporarily reduced in January 2023.												
1.08	Recruitment has been challenging but as the service moves in to 2023/24, vacancies are filled, and the Team Leader is busy training and developing new staff to ensure Connah's Quay and Flint revert to full-time hours as soon as possible.												
1.09	<p><b>Customer Access to Flintshire Connects 2022/23</b></p> <p>The last Annual Report was shared with Cabinet in 2019 prior to the Coronavirus pandemic which led to temporary closures across all Connects Centres throughout 2020. The restrictions imposed by Welsh Government led to Connects Centres closing with little notice to customers, and employees redirected to other duties e.g. supporting the Contact Centre and Homelessness, which they were able to undertake working from home.</p>												
1.10	As restrictions were eased by Welsh Government, the Connects Centres reopened with a reduced footfall owing to the advice to travel for essential reasons only, and the safety measures in place to protect employees and customers which impacted the services available. During 2022/23 the service saw a steady increase in footfall, however, it did not return to pre-pandemic levels, which might be due in part to the restricted opening hours.												
1.11	<p>Table 1 below illustrates footfall across Flintshire Connects in 2022/23:</p>  <table border="1"> <caption>Flintshire Connects Visitors 2022-23</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Location</th> <th>Visitors</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Mold</td> <td>14,470</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Holywell</td> <td>26,274</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Flint</td> <td>10,181</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Connah's Quay</td> <td>18,882</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Buckley</td> <td>14,508</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Location	Visitors	Mold	14,470	Holywell	26,274	Flint	10,181	Connah's Quay	18,882	Buckley	14,508
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1.12	Table 2 below illustrates recent footfall compared to 2018/19:												

**Flintshire Connects Visitors 2018-19 versus 2022-23**



As illustrated in the tables above, 115,154 people visited Flintshire Connects during 2018-19, this reduced to 84,415 (27%) in 2022/23.

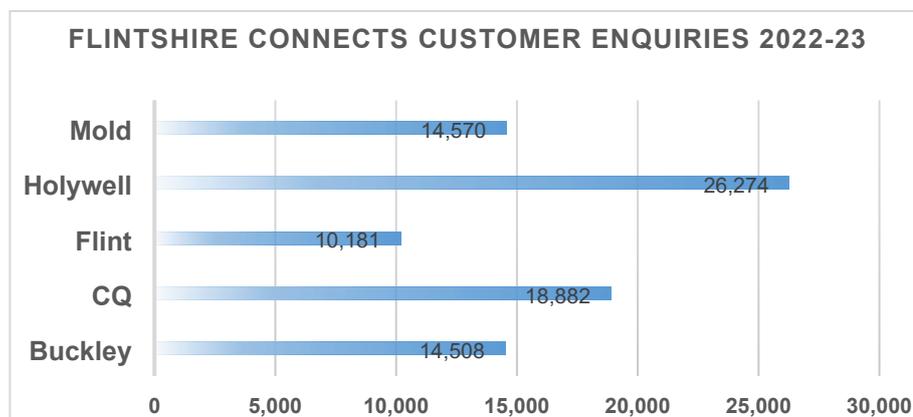
1.13 Table 3 provides a breakdown of demand across Connects Centres in 2022/23 including enquiry type:

	Buckley	CQ	Flint	Holywell	Mold	Total
Assisted Digital	3,392	4,880	1,469	3,556	2,541	15,838
Benefits (HB/CTRS/DHP)	1,413	2,432	1,074	2,343	1,628	8,890
Blue Badges	2,685	2,048	890	4,297	1,658	11,578
Capital Works	7	9	56	41	65	178
Community Safety	11	9	16	169	12	217
Countryside Services	12	2	1	39	1	55
Democratic Services / Electoral Services	30	19	19	45	23	136
EU Settlement Scheme	1	5	0	10	0	16
Highways	128	293	221	603	280	1,525
Housing & Prevention	514	810	990	1,104	558	3,976
Housing Programmes	27	492	124	178	46	867
Housing Repairs	133	192	397	771	273	1,766
HRC Sites	330	241	163	502	250	1,486
Partners - DWP/Aura/NWP	341	258	225	2,760	313	3,897
Planning & BC	33	67	18	79	27	224
Revenues / Council Tax	1,258	1,583	979	2,954	1,047	7,821
School Admissions	35	96	38	150	7	326
School Transport	16	20	10	81	10	137
Social Services - Adults	89	60	142	91	113	495
Social Services - Children	2	5	188	14	2	211
Translation & Interpretation	2	27	6	20	63	118
Transport for Wales	270	375	236	438	350	1,669
Waste & Recycling	3,779	4,959	2,919	6,029	5,303	22,989
	14,508	18,882	10,181	26,274	14,570	84,415

After waste and recycling services the second highest volume of customer contact relates to assisted digital which has increased from 12,881 in 2018/19 to 15,838 in 2022/23 (23%). This reflects the Council's commitment to supporting customers to access online services as outlined

in the Digital Strategy. Other noticeable increases include Blue Badge enquiries up from 8,748 to 11,578 (32%), however, a greater shift to supporting people to complete their applications online.

1.14 Table 4 illustrates the spread of customer enquiries across the Connects Centres:



Except for Holywell, all Connects Centres have seen a reduction in the number of customers accessing services over the last twelve months; Table 4 illustrates that Holywell is the busiest Connects Centre accounting for 31% of visitors. As the only Connects Centre to retain its full-time hours throughout 2022/23, this figure is unsurprising.

1.15 Table 5 analyses demand over the last few years:

	Buckley	CQ	Flint	Holywell	Mold
<b>2017/18</b>	11,332	19,908	20,978	25,494	18,921
<b>2018/19</b>	14,818	22,544	27,918	26,270	23,604
<b>2022/23</b>	14,508	18,882	10,181	26,274	14,570
	-310	-3,662	-17,737	4	-9,034
	<b>-2%</b>	<b>-19%</b>	<b>-66%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>-62%</b>

A useful breakdown of the top ten services by each Connects Centre is given in Appendix 1. Across all Connects Centres, Waste and Recycling, Assisted Digital, Blue Badges, Benefits and Revenue enquiries feature in the top five.

1.16 **Key Service Updates 2022/23**

Connects Centres help to deliver on the digital poverty theme within the Council Plan:

**Assisted Digital** is a key priority for the Council. Flintshire Connects play a key role in supporting the implementation of digital initiatives for those customers who may be digitally excluded to help them embrace digital technologies. During 2022/23 Customer Service Advisors assisted 15,838 customers which is an increase of 2,957 compared to the previous year and reflects our commitment to supporting customers to access services digitally. Flintshire Connects continue to support customers to access My

	Account enabling customers to view and track enquiries online and pay for Council services.
1.17	<b>National Databank</b> Flintshire Connects joined forces with Good Things Foundation to ensure residents on low incomes are digitally enabled by providing them with free SIM cards and data vouchers through the National Databank. Free SIM cards and data vouchers are available from our five Connects Centres to eligible residents, taking a trust-based approach. The free data has been provided by Virgin Media O2, Vodafone and Three.
1.18	<b>We Mind the Gap</b> Flintshire Connects has provided work experience placements to young women from various backgrounds where there has been little or no work support in the past. Customer Service Advisors have supported 6 months' work placements by sharing their knowledge and skills, confidence building and giving women the opportunity to gain importance experience.
1.19	In addition, Connects Centres help to deliver frontline council services:  <b>Blue Badges</b> have been administered by Flintshire Connects since 2014 using the Welsh Government's toolkit for assessing eligibility removing the burden on GPs and cost to the Local Authority. Following legislative changes across Wales that has widened the criteria for Blue Badges to include people with cognitive impairments and those who have temporary restrictions in their mobility, there is an increased demand in applications. Flintshire Connects handled 9,422 applications in 2022/23 of which 906 were refused and 4,256 issued Blue Badges. The Department for Transport continue to work with its partner Valtech who provide direct support to the Council as the host service for applying for Blue Badges including an online portal via gov.uk; and Allied Publicity Services who manufacture Blue Badges on behalf of the Council.
1.20	<b>Homelessness</b> triages are undertaken at all Connects Centres. During 2022/23 Flintshire Connects assisted 3,976 people in respect of their housing needs. Initial enquiries are managed by Customer Service Advisors with only urgent cases and those people requiring social housing being referred to Housing Prevention or SARTH thereby releasing capacity in Housing Prevention to focus on complex and urgent cases.
1.21	<b>Revenues and Benefit</b> are busy areas of work with Customer Service Advisors trained to support customers to access benefits such as cost of living payments, winter fuel support scheme, uniform grants, and free school meals.  Customer Service Advisors are trained to deal with enquiries at first point of contact which has improved the customer experience and first-time resolution which enables back-office services to focus on more specialist and complex cases.
1.22	<b>Payments</b> are taken at all Connects Centres which supports the Council's Revenue and Debt Recovery services. During 2022/23 Flintshire Connects took £3,191,399.92 across the five Connects Centres, broken down as follows:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buckley - £354,192.78</li> <li>• Connah's Quay - £779,982.29</li> <li>• Flint - £654,913.12</li> <li>• Holywell - £766,517.03</li> <li>• Mold - £635,794.70</li> </ul>
1.23	<p><b>2023/24 Priorities</b></p> <p>Flintshire Connects plays a critical role in the delivery of the Customer and Digital Strategies. Customer Service Advisors are skilled personnel who can support the Council Plan Digital Poverty theme by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting people to use digital technology.</li> <li>• Providing free of charge public access to the internet and devices.</li> </ul> <p>The service also supports the Digital Strategy by providing all our customers with the ability to find out information and access our services in a convenient and accessible way.</p> <p>Whilst assisted digital, the National Databank and We Mind the Gap are all positive developments in the last 12 months, Flintshire Connects' ability to develop further has been restricted due to resource issues. Flintshire Connects is committed to continuous improvement and looks forward to the year ahead. Specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing opening hours in Buckley (see below).</li> <li>• Providing fully trained Customer Service Advisors who are confident to deliver the wide range of services offered by Flintshire Connects across all Centres.</li> <li>• Reverting to full-time hours at Connah's Quay and Flint Connects as soon as training is complete.</li> <li>• Introduction of the Voter Authority Certificate to support people apply digitally for ID prior to elections/polling day.</li> <li>• Promoting and encouraging take-up of the National Databank.</li> <li>• Introducing a Digital Volunteering Scheme to facilitate digital surgeries at designated Connects Centres.</li> <li>• Reviewing customer facing services to identify those services which cannot be delivered digitally or by telephone to ensure the best use of resources including reception duties.</li> <li>• Assisted digital support in respect of new online services introduced by the Council.</li> </ul>
1.24	<p><b>Opening Hours at Buckley Connects</b></p> <p>The opening hours at Buckley Connects are currently restricted to two days per week. Notwithstanding the reduction in the Connects budget, officers have, at the request of the Cabinet member, examined whether it is possible to increase those hours so that it has parity with Mold.</p> <p>Across the overall Customer Contact budget (specifically salary savings within the Registration Service), funding has been identified to enable Buckley to open three days a week. One part-time post within Flintshire Connects can be increased to full-time to provide the additional resource to</p>

	open Buckley for the extra day. To ensure that the expected high levels of service are delivered, this increase of opening hours cannot take place until all of the new advisors have been fully trained. The increase in hours is therefore expected to commence around July/August and details will be communicated to Members and customers in due course.
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<b>2.00</b>	<b>RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS</b>
2.01	None.

<b>3.00</b>	<b>CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT</b>
3.01	None.

<b>4.00</b>	<b>RISK MANAGEMENT</b>
4.01	None.

<b>5.00</b>	<b>APPENDICES</b>
5.01	Appendix 1 – breakdown of the top ten services accessed by customers at each Connects Centre during 2022/23.

<b>6.00</b>	<b>LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS</b>
6.01	<b>Contact Officer:</b> Rebecca Jones, Customer Contact Service Manager <b>Telephone:</b> 01352 702413 <b>E-mail:</b> <a href="mailto:rebecca.jones@flintshire.gov.uk">rebecca.jones@flintshire.gov.uk</a>

<b>7.00</b>	<b>GLOSSARY OF TERMS</b>
7.01	<b>Digital Services</b> - the electronic delivery of information including data and content across multiple platforms and devices such as a website or mobile phone.