

## CABINET

<b>Date of Meeting</b>	Tuesday, 22 <sup>nd</sup> May 2018
<b>Report Subject</b>	Flintshire Connects Update
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	Cabinet Member for Corporate Management and Assets
<b>Report Author</b>	Chief Officer (Governance)
<b>Type of Report</b>	Operational

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report details the progress made to date to in transferring customer facing services into Connects so that customers can have their enquiries resolved at first point of contact wherever possible. There has been considerable progress across number of services including housing solutions, blue badges and revenues and benefits which have enabled efficiencies to be delivered within back office functions.

Flintshire Connects is currently undergoing some changes to deliver efficiencies without closing any of the centres which will be achieved by amending opening hours in the centres from June 2018.

Moving forward the role of Connects will change and develop as Flintshire starts a programme of work to make services available digitally wherever possible. The service will play a key role supporting the digital roll out by providing modern technology within Flintshire Connects Centres for those customers digitally excluded to help them embrace digital technology. The Connects Centres will play a key role through the transition period, providing advice and support to customers to ensure they have the confidence to use digital technology as a way of contacting the Council and other private sector organisations thus realising the benefits of the digital age.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That Cabinet notes the update on the Flintshire Connects Service.
2	That Cabinet notes the role of the Flintshire Connects Service to support the Customer and Digital Strategy.

## REPORT DETAILS

1.00	<b>TO PROVIDE AN UPDATE ON THE FLINTSHIRE CONNECTS SERVICE</b>
1.01	<b>Background</b>
	<p>The first Flintshire Connects Centre opened in November 2012. The service is delivered in partnership with North Wales Police, Job Centre Plus and Aura. There are now five Flintshire Connects Centres across the county providing face to face service delivery in convenient town centre locations.</p> <p>At the outset it was expected that a range of enquiries and functions from across the Council could be resolved at first point of contact by skilled staff, reducing duplication, realising back office efficiencies and improving the service for the customer.</p>
1.02	<b>Progress to Date</b>
	<p><b>Housing Benefit/Council Tax Reduction Scheme</b></p> <p>Flintshire Connects have always provided basic housing benefit advice but many of the enquiries had to be passed back to the Benefit Team to be resolved.</p> <p>In 2016 Connects were further trained to enable them to deal with more enquiries at first point of contact. This improved the customer experience as customers could receive much more advice, help and assistance at that first visit. This also meant that the resource within the Benefits Team was able to focus more on assessing and processing of applications and dealing with the more specialist and complex cases.</p> <p>In 2017/18 Flintshire Connects Advisors dealt with 13,557 enquiries on behalf of the Housing Benefit Service.</p> <p><b>Blue Badges</b></p> <p>In September 2014, the Blue Badge service transferred in full to the Connects service creating an efficiency for the Council. The Blue Badge applications are managed by trained officers within the Connects Centres with no duplication or double handling. Enquiries are dealt with at first point of contact in a timely manner with no requirement for back office functions to support the service.</p> <p>The Blue Badge service was previously reliant on supporting evidence being provided by GP's at a cost of £25 to £40 per letter. On transfer to the Connects Service the newly formed Welsh Government toolkit was introduced and this removed the need for GP letters and removed this cost to the Authority. All applications are still assessed by the Connects Advisors using this toolkit.</p> <p>The Connects Team dealt with 3700 blue badge applications in 2017/18. 1741 of these were automatically qualifying with the remaining 1959 being</p>

assessed at first point of contact and an outcome given to the customer there and then.

There have been some changes in the Legislation in Wales that has widened the criteria for Blue Badges to include those with cognitive impairments and those who have temporary restrictions to their mobility.

As part of the Customer Services Strategy and the move to deliver services digitally, it was identified that those who automatically qualify based on certain benefit awards did not need to see an advisor face to face. It was felt that for these more straightforward applications applying online would be more effective and convenient for the customer. The service invested in a digital solution in December 2017 that allows the customer to apply for automatic qualifications online. Support is still provided via the Connects Centres to those who are unable to apply online.

### **Homeless Triage**

In 2015 the housing triage service face to face function transferred to Connects. The Council deals with over 3,000 housing enquiries a year and the pressure of managing this demand was creating pressure on the specialist homeless service. Face to face enquiries were being placed in a queue as resources were limited and customers could only present at County Offices in Flint for assistance and would often experience long waits to see an Officer.

Initial enquiries and triage assessments are now managed within Connects Centres at locations convenient to customers. A range of advice and options are provided immediately and urgent cases are forwarded directly to the Housing Solutions service where capacity has been released to focus on more complex or urgent cases.

The triage service has also meant that cases are only referred to specialist officers where the applicants have already been triaged as having a need for that particular service. In 2017/18 out of all the triages undertaken, only 49% of these enquires were referred onto the Housing Solutions Team allowing the more specialist officers more capacity to concentrate on the cases where applicants were genuinely homeless or threatened with homelessness. This has been a significant benefit to the service and its ability to manage the growing demand.

### **Birth Declarations**

Previously all birth declarations were registered at Llwynegryn Hall in Mold by the Registration Team. Depending on demand at any time, additional staff were sometimes required to manage the appointments. This incurred costs to the department to pay for these additional hours worked.

In 2016 Birth Declaration appointments were piloted in Flintshire Connects, specifically Connah's Quay Connects. An advisor was trained by the Registration Service to enable them to deliver the service from the Connects Centres directly. This has reduced pressure on the Registration Service and utilised existing staff resource within Connects Centres.

This has worked well and customers in the locality were able to register the birth of a child in their own community without travel to Llwynegrin Hall in Mold. The unforeseen benefit of Connects delivering this service was that the advisors are trained in such a diverse range of areas they were able to provide many of the additional services that a change in family makeup can trigger. These include:

- **Entitlement to Child Tax Credits** – Advisors are able to ensure that customers are aware of the entitlement and given advice on how to apply and ensure vulnerable customers are aware and receive their entitlement.
- **Changes to Housing Benefit/CTRS Entitlement** – A new or additional child can have effects on benefit awards and Housing Benefit Teams need to be informed of any changes of this nature. The Connects Advisor is able to do this at the point of registering the birth and ensure the customer's benefit awards are correct and up to date.
- **Universal Credit** – An addition to the household in some cases will trigger the customer to move over from their current legacy benefits to Universal Credit. The advisor is able to explain this process fully and assist them to make the new claim for Universal Credit there and then.
- **Wider Benefits** – The advisors are able to give additional information to new parents about other support services such as Mother and Baby Groups held locally, Nappy Schemes that are currently running and they are also able to promote Aura Library Services and sign customers up for membership.

We have now rolled the delivery of Birth Declarations in Connects out to Connah's Quay, Flint and Holywell and are continuing with staff training to allow the service to be fully accessible in all five centres.

In 2017/18 Connects completed 195 Birth Declarations across the three centres.

### **Universal Credit**

In April 2017 Universal Credit was rolled out in Flintshire. This meant significant changes and challenges for both the Council and the residents that live in the area. Universal Credit is one of the most significant welfare reforms introduced to date and Flintshire Connects have played a key part in the provision of support to those affected.

Since the introduction of Universal Credit Connects have dealt with 3340 enquires and requests for help. The table below gives a breakdown of the volumes and the types of support provided:

Enquiry about UC	1246
Referred Customer to UC Website	649
Customer Used Self Service to make claim (Unassisted)	86
Online UC claim - Low level Assistance	217
Online UC claim - One to One Support	309
Managing Online Claim	280
Setting Up an Email Address	96
Referral For Support	41
Referral for DAF	40
Assistance To Apply for DAF	46
Foodbank	106
DHP	211
Assistance to Request Advance Payment	12
Other (Please Specify)	1
<b>Total Number of Enquiries</b>	<b>3340</b>

### Assisted Digital Support

The service also plays a key role in supporting the digital roll out by providing modern technology within Centres for those customers who may be digitally excluded to help them embrace digital technology e.g. self-service computers.

Advice and support is provided to customers to ensure they have the confidence to use digital technology as a way of contacting the Council and making their service requests. Additionally, advisors will support customers to make applications for services online where the customer does not have the ability or skills to do this themselves.

In 2017/18, across the range of services delivered by Flintshire Connects, advisors have assisted customers with 11,570 digital interactions.

### 1.03 Current Demand and Pressures

The following table shows the demand across the centres in 2017/18 and the breakdown of enquiries.

	Buckley	Connahs Quay	Flint	Holywell	Mold	Total
Service Charges	21	41	27	77	25	191
Birth Declarations	23	153	28	76	2	282
Blue Badges	1646	2062	991	1377	1394	7470
Cheque Payments	84	95	49	172	102	502
Concessionary Travel / Transport	667	1044	723	866	952	4252
Council Tax	781	2125	1641	1356	1356	7259
Debt Enforcement	34	121	71	65	51	342
Education / Schools / Coleg Cambia	29	129	56	55	36	305
Electoral Register /	28	46	68	66	72	280

	<b>Voting</b>						
	<b>Environmental Health / Public Protection / ASB</b>	14	76	39	70	36	235
	<b>Library Services</b>	26	37	23	35	16	137
	<b>HB / CTRS</b>	1771	4155	2800	2429	2402	13557
	<b>Housing General</b>	325	749	1093	922	346	3435
	<b>Housing Options</b>	470	1356	1653	769	611	4859
	<b>Housing Rent</b>	513	1290	1254	1950	890	5897
	<b>Housing Repairs</b>	170	503	1015	1238	387	3313
	<b>JCP</b>	26	79	1608	309	44	2066
	<b>Language Line / Migrant Workers Support</b>	1	36	19	22	3	81
	<b>Non - Council / Foodbank</b>	80	193	185	322	112	892
	<b>Self Service - Signposted</b>	57	224	103	356	106	846
	<b>Planning</b>	16	42	246	39	28	371
	<b>Self Serve - Assisted</b>	675	1564	1998	5426	1907	11570
	<b>Social Services – Childrens</b>	2	9	324	6	0	341
	<b>Social Services - Adults</b>	21	61	120	86	69	357
	<b>Streetscene / Highways / N &amp; F</b>	248	472	715	777	998	3210
	<b>Tourist Information</b>	4	1	5	9	42	61
	<b>Resident Parking</b>	16	36	11	25	6	94
	<b>Van Ban</b>	44	85	101	162	45	437
	<b>Waste Services</b>	3531	3112	3724	5789	6868	23024
	<b>Welsh Speaking</b>	9	9	3	15	13	49
	<b>NWP - 101</b>	0	1	70	245	2	318
	<b>NWP - Email</b>	0	0	0	29	0	29
	<b>NWP - Face to Face</b>	0	1	196	301	0	498
	<b>NWP - Lost &amp; Found</b>	0	1	19	53	0	73
	<b>Footfall</b>	<b>11332</b> 11%	<b>19908</b> 21%	<b>20978</b> 22%	<b>25494</b> 26%	<b>18921</b> 20%	<b>96633</b>
<b>2.0</b>	<b><u>CHALLENGES FACING THE COUNCIL</u></b>						
<b>2.01</b>	<b>Further Efficiencies</b>						
	<p>As part of the Council's Business Planning process, it was identified that Flintshire Connects needed to be delivered differently and generate efficiencies.</p> <p>The Council was keen to avoid any changes that would affect customers and partners such as closure of some centres.</p> <p>The service was able to propose a new leaner staff structure which enabled all the centres to remain open with slightly amended opening hours and realise an efficiency of £46,000. This is in addition to the £30,000 efficiency</p>						

	<p>delivered in 2017/18.</p> <p>All Flintshire Connects Centres will be open from 9.00am – 4.30pm from the 1st June 2018. There is a communication plan in place to ensure that these changes are shared with all stakeholders and the public prior to the implementation of these changes.</p>
2.02	<p><b>Digital and Customer Strategy – Moving Forward</b></p> <p>The Connects Service plays a major role in the delivery of the Digital and Customer Strategy. The service makes available face to face services across the county to support the most vulnerable. The service is delivered by staff skilled across a number of functions to resolve customer enquiries at first point of contact.</p> <p>The Flintshire Connects Service contributes to the following aims of the digital strategy and Customer Strategy;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A commitment to understand and respect the needs of vulnerable customers;</li> <li>• To deliver services in full where they cannot be delivered digitally or by telephone;</li> <li>• To provide excellent face-to-face services in town centre locations;</li> <li>• To support and assist customers to access digital services;</li> </ul> <p>The role of Connects will change and develop as Flintshire starts a programme of work to make services available digitally wherever possible. Connects centres will continue to provide an important function where face to face contact is required and will continue to strive to deliver these services in full at first point of contact. The service will also play a key role supporting the digital roll out by providing modern technology within Flintshire Connects Centres for those customers digitally excluded to help them embrace digital technology. There are already self-service computers and touch screen pods available in the centres. The Connects Centres will play a key role through the transition period providing advice and support to customers to ensure they have the confidence to use digital technology as a way of contacting the Council and other private sector organisations thus realising the benefits of the digital age.</p> <p>Moving forward consideration needs to be given to the services that require face to face support across the Council. The Customer and Digital strategy gives a commitment to maintain face to face services for more vulnerable customers. There are further areas that can be aligned to the Connects Service so the Council can build on the benefits achieved to date including the resolution of enquiries at first point of contact, reducing duplication and realising efficiencies within back office functions.</p>

<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	None.

<b>6.00</b>	<b>LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS</b>
6.01	<b>Contact Officer:</b> Katie Clubb <b>Telephone:</b> 01352 703518 <b>E-mail:</b> <a href="mailto:Katie.clubb@flintshire.gov.uk">Katie.clubb@flintshire.gov.uk</a>

<b>7.00</b>	<b>GLOSSARY OF TERMS</b>
7.01	None.