

CABINET

Date of Meeting	Wednesday, 25 th September 2024
Report Subject	Flintshire Connects Annual Report 2023-24
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Corporate Services
Report Author	Chief Officer (Governance)
Type of Report	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 2023-24.

This report also seeks support from Cabinet to review the Flintshire Connects service in 2024-25.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That Cabinet notes Flintshire Connects annual performance 2023-24.
2	That, in light of reducing footfall at Flintshire Connects Centres: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) there should be a review of the service, commencing with public consultation on why usage is reducing, and what functions the service could/should provide; and b) the consultation should also explore the potential impact on those with protected characteristics of possibly reducing opening hours to reflect the reduced usage by residents

REPORT DETAILS

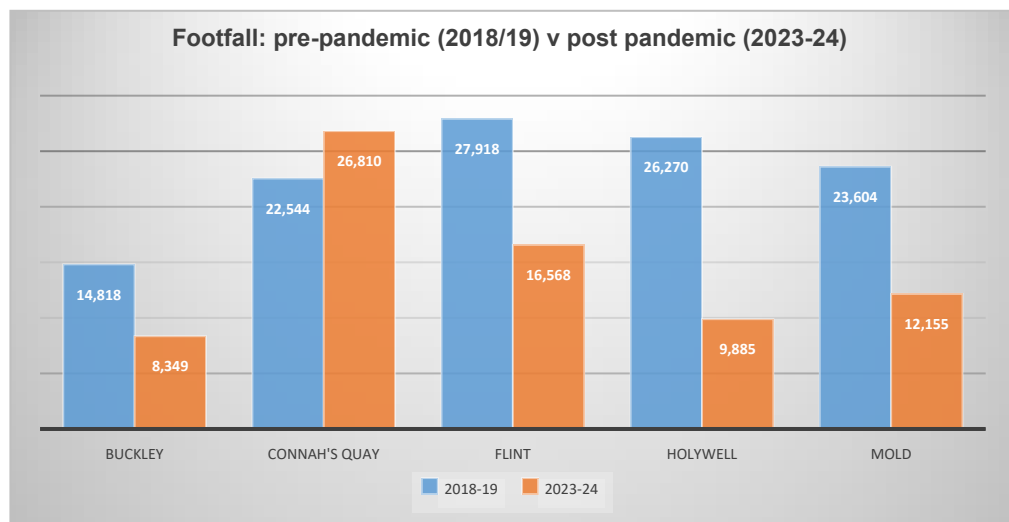
1.00	FLINTSHIRE CONNECTS ANNUAL PERFORMANCE 2023-24
1.01	Background Flintshire Connects provide face-to-face services at “one stop shops” in Buckley, Connah’s Quay, Flint, Holywell, and Mold. The service is also integral to the Council’s Digital Strategy in terms of providing high quality, accessible, responsive, and cost-effective public services. The team provide access to a range of statutory services including Blue Badges, Social Housing, Homelessness, Revenues and Benefits. The team also support 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.
1.02	Flintshire Connects is proud of its partnership working with Aura, Job Centre Plus and North Wales Police. By co-locating services in this way the team can provide support to the county’s most vulnerable customers as well as those who need support to access services online.
1.03	Flintshire Connects employ 9.90 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">• Buckley: Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday 9am until 4:30pm• Connah’s Quay: Monday to Friday 9am until 4:30pm• Flint: Monday to Friday 9am until 4:30pm• Holywell: Monday to Friday 9am until 4:30pm• Mold: Monday, Wednesday and Friday 9am until 4:30pm
1.04	Over recent years Flintshire Connects has experienced both recruitment and retention difficulties and has needed to make savings to help balance the Council’s budget. In October 2022, Buckley and Mold Connects Centres reduced their opening hours on a temporary basis and this became a permanent arrangement at the start of 2023-24. In this way the service has supported the Governance portfolio to achieve efficiencies of £76,000 through a restructure and revised opening hours. At the end of 2022-23 a further £60,000 efficiency was put forward to help bridge the funding gap for 2023-24.
1.05	As mentioned above, Flintshire Connects faced significant recruitment and retention issues during 2022-23 which led to eight new employees joining the service over last 12 months. Consequently, it has taken time to train new employees to a level where they are able to confidently support customers unaided. The service is currently at full establishment (i.e. all posts in the staffing structure are filled).

1.06 Flintshire Connects 2023-24

1.07 In 2020 the Coronavirus pandemic led to the temporary closures of all Connects Centres. The restrictions imposed by Welsh Government led to Connects Centres closing with little notice to customers and employees were redirected to other duties including telephone support via the Contact Centre. As restrictions were eased by Welsh Government, the Connects Centres reopened albeit with a reduced footfall owing to the advice to travel for essential purposes only. It was anticipated that customers might not immediately return to pre-pandemic levels, and whilst Flintshire Connects has returned to “business as usual”, footfall with the exception of Conna’s Quay Connects has not.

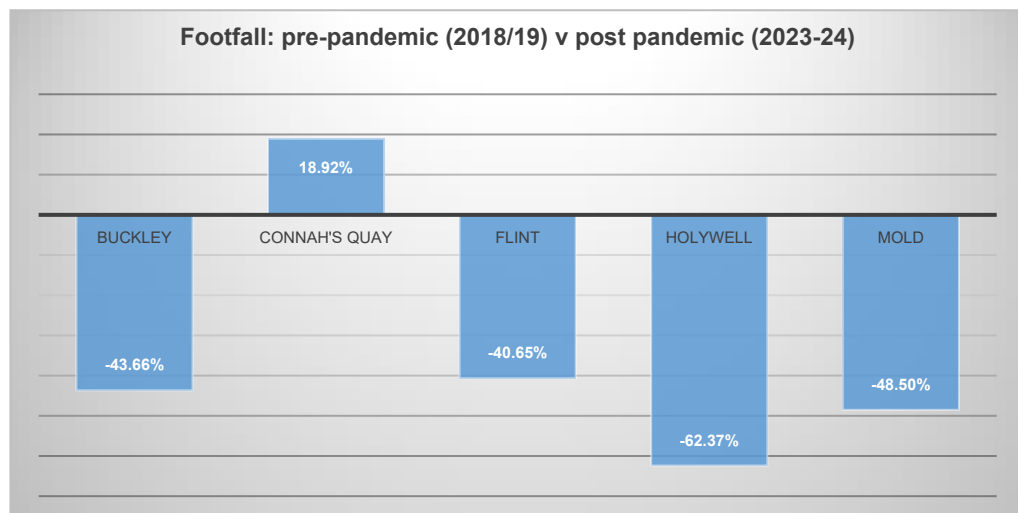
1.08 Table 1 below illustrates footfall pre-pandemic compared to now:

Table 1



1.09 Table 2 illustrates the impact on demand:

Table 2



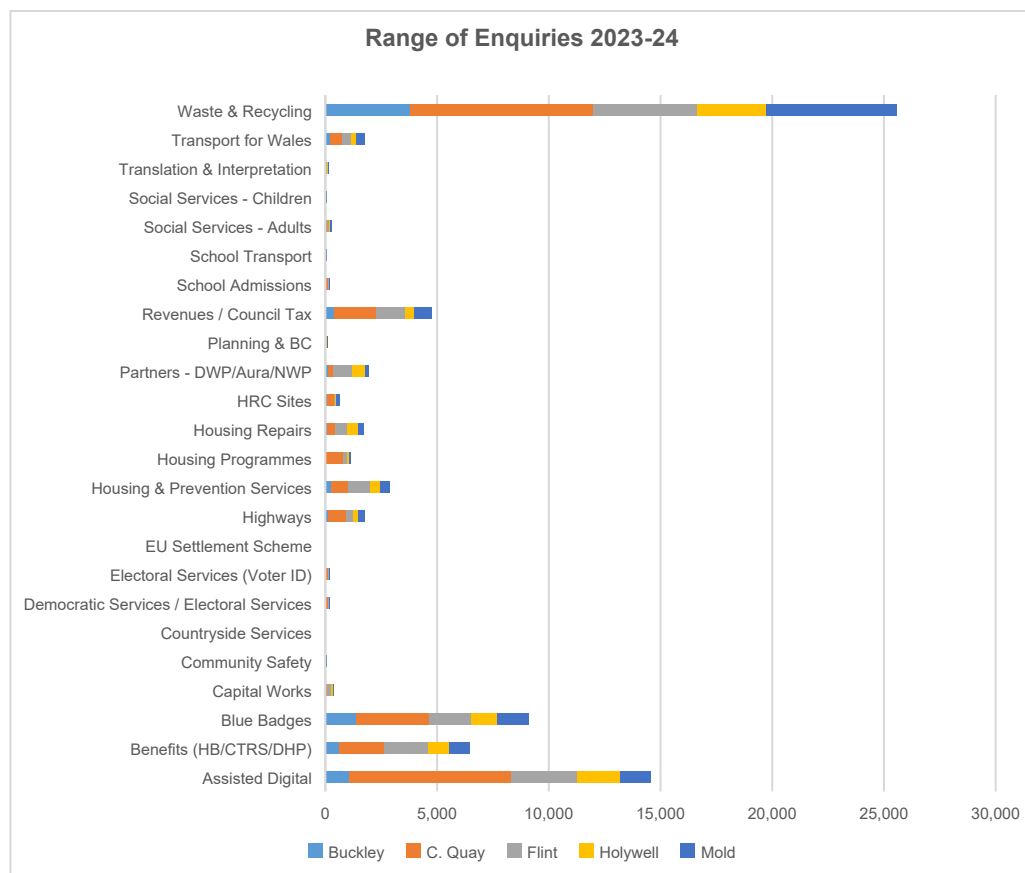
As noted above the data informs the Council that except for Connah's Quay, footfall to Connects Centres has not returned to pre-pandemic levels and demand is reducing.

1.10 Prior to the pandemic Flintshire Connects received over 115,000 customers, but this has reduced to 73,767 in the last 12 months. This shift in customer behaviour represents a 41,387 reduction in footfall (35.94%). In the last 12 months alone footfall reduced by over 10,500 (12.51%). In Buckley and Mold where it was anticipated the service would expect to see 60% of usual footfall due to part-time opening hours across three days, the actual footfall is less, Buckley (56%) and Mold (51%).

1.11 The closures during the pandemic accelerated societal shift towards the use of online services. It appears that the shift has not been wholly reversed following the easing of restrictions. The service needs to recognise that reduction in usage and reflect on what functions it should be providing to support residents whilst tailoring its availability to reducing levels of demand.

1.12 Table 3 provides a breakdown of the range of enquiries received by Flintshire Connects:

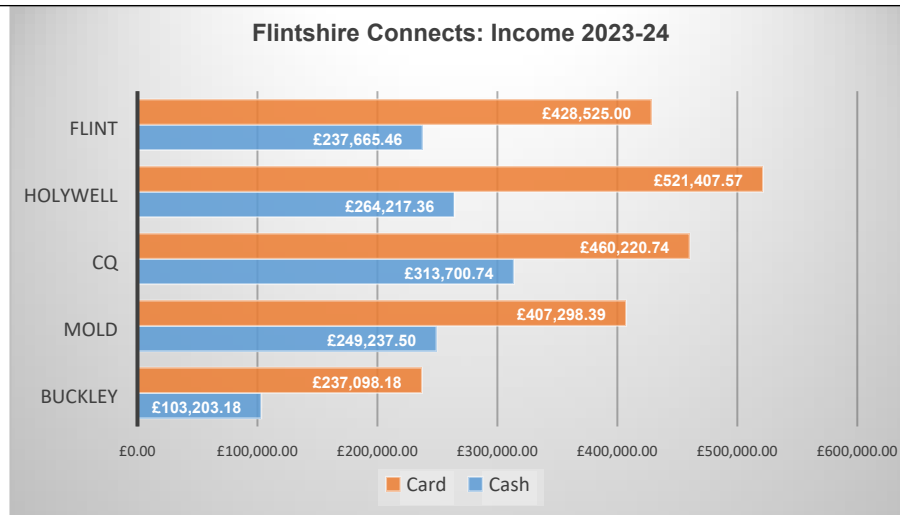
Table 3



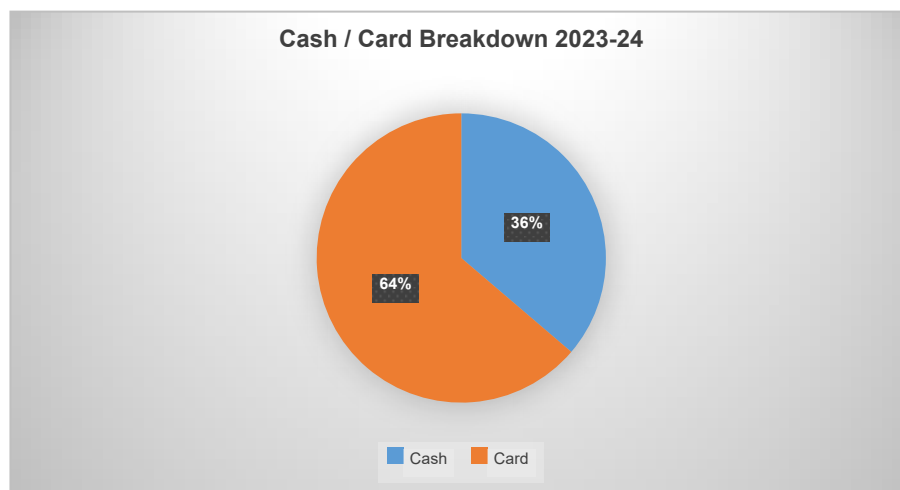
The high volume of waste and recycling enquiries relate to the supply of waste and recycling receptacles.

1.13 **Key Service Updates 2023-24**

	<p>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 2023-24 Customer Service Advisors assisted 14,328 customers which is a small reduction of 1,510 compared to the previous year. Flintshire Connects continue to support customers to access My Account enabling customers to view and track enquiries online and pay for Council services.</p>
1.14	<p>National Databank Flintshire Connects joined forces with Good Things Foundation in 2022-23 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 continue to be made available from all Connects Centres to eligible residents, taking a trust-based approach. The free data has been provided by Virgin Media, O2, Vodafone and Three.</p>
1.15	<p>Blue Badges are administered by Flintshire Connects using the Welsh Government's toolkit for assessing eligibility. Flintshire Connects handled 5,458 applications in 2023-24 of which 624 were refused and 2,506 issued; this represents a reduction of 42% in demand compared to the previous year (9,422 applications 2022-23) as more applicants are confident to use the digital platform on gov.uk. 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.</p>
1.16	<p>Homelessness triages are undertaken at all Connects Centres. During 2023-24 Flintshire Connects supported 2,876 people in respect of their housing needs, a reduction of 27.5% compared to the previous year (3,976 people supported in 2022-23). 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.</p>
1.17	<p>Revenues and Benefit are busy areas of work with Customer Service Advisors trained to support customers to access benefits such as cost of living payments, 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.</p>
1.18	<p>Payments are taken at all Connects Centres which supports the Council's Revenue and Debt Recovery services. During 2023-24 Flintshire Connects received a consistent level of income compared to the previous year - £3,222,574.12 across the five Connects Centres, broken down as follows:</p>



Interestingly, the highest number of transactions relate to card payments despite options to pay online or set-up direct debits for example.



1.19 The above data clearly highlights customer demand in Flintshire Connects is reducing and customer behaviour is changing:

- Footfall reduced by 35.94% post pandemic;
- Assisted digital support reduced as more people become digitally enabled and can self-serve (1.12);
- Blue Badge face-to-face support reduced as more people apply online (1.14);
- Reduced demand for low level homeless triages (1.15);
- Reduction in cash (1.17).

In contrast, digital services and telephone remain popular channels to access council services. Overall, this data highlights the need to review Flintshire Connects considering the declining customer demand.

1.20 **2024-25 Priorities**

Flintshire Connects plays a critical role in the delivery of the Council's Digital Strategy. Customer Service Advisors are skilled personnel who can support the Council Plan Digital Poverty theme by:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting people to use digital technology. • Providing free of charge public access to the internet and devices. <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>
1.21	Whilst it is acknowledged Flintshire Connects is a highly valued service, the data within this report highlights the need to review service provision and with this in mind, Flintshire Connects is committed to a review of customer demand, resources, and opening times in 2024-25.

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	A review of Flintshire Connects will establish the best use of resource in the future based on customer demand and feedback.

3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	Flintshire Connects support a wide demography and assist customers with the characteristics that are protected by the Equality Act 2010. As such, as part of a review of the service, an impact assessment will be undertaken to assess the impact any future changes may have on customers and solutions to mitigate risks.

4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
4.01	Currently, the service does not undertake consultation with customers on their satisfaction with the service. Given the short nature of many transactions it is not appropriate to undertake such consultation at the point of delivery. However, the national residents survey does/will in future include a question about satisfaction with the Flintshire Connects service.
4.02	Given the demography of customers, and noting that many have protected characteristics, a public consultation should be at the heart of the review of the service. It is suggested that we should begin the review by consulting residents on what they value about the service, whether/how it might be improved within budget constraints, why usage has reduced and how we might mitigate the impact of reduced opening hours as a consequence of reductions in footfall.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	None.

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	None.

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	Contact Officer: Rebecca Jones, Customer Contact Service Manager Telephone: 01352 702413 E-mail: rebecca.jones@flintshire.gov.uk

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	Digital Services - the electronic delivery of information including data and content across multiple platforms and devices such as a website or mobile phone.