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25 June 2008

To: Chairman – Councillor JD Batchelor  
Vice-Chairman – Councillor JA Hockney  
Members of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee – Councillors Mrs VM Barrett,  
R Hall, MB Loynes, PW Topping, NS Davies, Miss JA Dipple, Mrs EM Heazell,  
MJ Mason, Ms BZD Smith and Mrs BE Waters

Quorum: 6

Dear Councillor

You are invited to attend the next meeting of **SCRUTINY AND OVERVIEW COMMITTEE**, which will be held in the **SWANSLEY ROOM, GROUND FLOOR** at South Cambridgeshire Hall on **THURSDAY, 3 JULY 2008 at 4.00 p.m. or following the conclusion of the Cabinet meeting, whichever is the later.**

Yours faithfully  
**GJ HARLOCK**  
Chief Executive

**The Council is committed to improving, for all members of the community, access to its agendas and minutes. We try to take all circumstances into account but, if you have any specific needs, please let us know, and we will do what we can to help you.**

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## AGENDA

## PAGES

### PROCEDURAL ITEMS

**1. Apologies**

To receive apologies for absence from committee members.

**2. Declarations of Interest**

*Please note that the Constitution requires that when considering any decision in respect of which a member of the Committee is subject to a party whip, the member must declare the existence of the whip. Under the Code of Conduct, any Councillor who has a personal or prejudicial interest should declare this at the meeting. A member of a Task and Finish Group or Panel, but not a Sub Group of the Scrutiny Committee, which has discussed an item that is now being scrutinised, cannot participate in that debate as a member of the Committee nor vote.*

**3. Call in: Service Continuity Arrangements for December and January Holiday Period**

**1 - 18**

To consider the call-in of the decision of the Staffing Portfolio Holder in respect of Service Continuity Arrangements for December 2008-January 2009.

**Covering report plus papers previously considered by the Staffing Portfolio Holder attached.**

## **GUIDANCE NOTES FOR VISITORS TO SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE HALL**

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### **Security**

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### **Disturbance by Public**

If a member of the public interrupts proceedings, the Chairman will warn the person concerned. If they continue to interrupt, the Chairman will order their removal from the meeting room. If there is a general disturbance in any part of the meeting room open to the public, the Chairman may call for that part to be cleared.

### **Smoking**

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Vending machines and a water dispenser are available on the ground floor near the lifts. There shall be no food and drink in the Council Chamber.

## **EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

The law allows Councils to consider a limited range of issues in private session without members of the Press and public being present. Typically, such issues relate to personal details, financial and business affairs, legal privilege and so on. In every case, the public interest in excluding the Press and Public from the meeting room must outweigh the public interest in having the information disclosed to them. The following statement will be proposed, seconded and voted upon.

"I propose that the Press and public be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of the following item number(s) ..... in accordance with Section 100(A) (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that, if present, there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in paragraph(s) ..... of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act."

If exempt (confidential) information has been provided as part of the agenda, the Press and public will not be able to view it. There will be an explanation on the website however as to why the information is exempt.

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**SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

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**REPORT TO:** Scrutiny and Overview Committee

3 July 2008

**AUTHOR/S:** Chief Executive / Democratic Services Manager

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**CALL-IN: SERVICE CONTINUITY ARRANGEMENTS FOR  
DECEMBER AND JANUARY HOLIDAY PERIOD****Purpose**

1. To receive the call-in of the Staffing Portfolio Holder's decision on 17 June 2008 that: *for this year volunteers will be sought from service areas to provide a skeleton service during the Christmas period. The extra statutory days will be added to employee leave entitlement. The concessionary day will be used to close the office on Friday 2 January 2009. For future Christmas periods the office will be open as normal and application of the concessionary day will be decided annually by the Staffing Portfolio Holder.*

**Background**

2. Council decided in 1996 that the Council offices should close between Christmas and New Year. On 11 February 1997, following a report from the then Chief Executive on "the successful experience of the office closure over the recent Christmas holiday period" the Finance, Resources and Staffing Committee decided to continue this policy.

**Report**

3. This decision was revisited at a meeting of the Staffing Portfolio Holder on 17 June 2008. The report of the HR Manager to that meeting is at Appendix A.
4. Following the decision as at 1 above, the chairman of the local Unison branch asked the Chairman of the Scrutiny and Overview committee to consider calling in the decision. His request is at Appendix B.
5. This request was discussed at the Scrutiny and Overview Committee meeting of 19 June where Members agreed that the Chairman should "seek [constitutional] advice from senior officers and Members before deciding whether to call in this decision".
6. The chairman took the decision to call in the decision under Article 13 of the constitution, specifically, on the grounds that the decision was not made in accordance with the following principles of decision-making:
  - Due consultation and the taking of professional advice from officers
  - Presumption in favour of openness, helpfulness and consistency
  - Consideration of available options and giving reasons for decisions
7. The Committee may therefore examine the process by which the decision was made to establish whether it accorded with the principles laid out above. It may also consider the decision itself and whether the evidence supported the decision made, or an alternative course of action.

8. The Committee will have the opportunity to interview the Staffing Portfolio Holder, the Chief Executive, the Human Resources Manager and the Chairman of the local branch of Unison.
9. Further evidence will include:
  - Result of staff poll
  - List of feedback received from Unison members
  - Views of any staff who voted in favour of opening
  - Fuller list of neighbouring councils' opening hours
  - Costs of opening the building 29-31 December
  - Contact Centre manager report

**Options**

10. The Committee has three options following its review of the decision:
  - To confirm the decision of the portfolio holder, in which case it can be implemented immediately
  - To refer the decision back to the portfolio holder for re-consideration, with an alternative recommendation which addresses any departures from the agreed principles at paragraph 6 above. The portfolio holder may amend his original decision or not, before adopting a final decision.
  - To refer the matter to Council with a recommendation, unless the Portfolio Holder has indicated a preparedness to reconsider the matter. Council, having considered the matter, may allow the decision to be implemented immediately, or refer the matter back to the portfolio holder. The portfolio holder may amend his original decision or not, before adopting a final decision.

**Implications**

11. Financial	Costs associated with Christmas/New Year opening will be available at the meeting.
Legal	As at paragraph 6 above
Staffing	See original report
Risk Management	See original report
Equal Opportunities	Other authorities who open between Christmas and New Year have not been challenged under Equalities legislation

**Effect on Corporate Objectives and Service Priorities**

12. Work in partnership to manage growth to benefit everyone in South Cambridgeshire now and in the future	<i>See original report (Appendix A)</i>
Deliver high quality services that represent best value and are accessible to all our community	<i>See original report (Appendix A)</i>
Enhance quality of life and build a sustainable South Cambridgeshire where everyone is proud to live and work	<i>See original report (Appendix A)</i>

**Recommendation**

13. That the Committee consider the call-in of the decision in respect of service continuity arrangements for the December and January holiday period and make a determination in accordance with paragraph 10 above.

**Background Papers:**

Appendix A: Original report to Staffing Portfolio Holder's meeting, 17 June 2008

Appendix B: Letter from Unison to Cllr Batchelor

**Contact Officer:**

Richard May – Democratic Services Manager. Telephone: (01954) 713016

Jackie Sayers – Scrutiny Development Officer Telephone: (01954) 713451

## SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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REPORT TO: Staffing Portfolio Holder  
AUTHOR/S: HR Manager

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17<sup>th</sup> June 2008**SERVICE CONTINUITY ARRANGEMENTS FOR DECEMBER AND JANUARY HOLIDAY PERIOD****Purpose**

1. To provide information to the Portfolio holder in respect of proposals for public access and service continuity during the Christmas (December 2008) and New Year (January 2009) holiday period.

**Executive Summary**

2. South Cambridgeshire District Council has, for many years, adopted the practice of closing the main offices and depot for the duration of the Christmas holiday period and New Year. Emergency and statutory services have been provided through 'On Call and Standby' arrangements. The report contains background information about service arrangements, office closure practices and staff consultation.
3. Elected Members have considered service delivery arrangements following the Christmas and New Year period for the holiday 2007/8 and in particular, refuse collection arrangements. Elected Members have expressed a wish to provide an improved service coverage for the same holiday period 2008/9 including public access at the main offices at Cambourne.

**Background**

4. South Cambridgeshire District Council has, in the past, operated a practice of closing the main offices and depot for the period covering Christmas and New Years Day. This has meant that offices have been closed on Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Years Day and, depending on how the public holiday dates fall in a working week, certain week days between 27<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> December are also days on which the offices were closed. In 2007 this arrangement meant that the offices were closed on 25<sup>th</sup> (Tuesday), 26<sup>th</sup> (Wednesday), 27<sup>th</sup> (Thursday), 28<sup>th</sup> (Friday) and 31<sup>st</sup> (Monday) and New Years Day 1<sup>st</sup> Jan (Tuesday). Staff returned to work on 2<sup>nd</sup> January.
5. To facilitate the additional closure days the Council has an agreement (stated in contracts of employment) that it will enforce the use of the two extra statutory holiday days to cover the Christmas closure. Employment contracts contain the following wording:
  - (ii) Statutory Holidays All statutory holidays are given:
  - (iii) Extra Statutory Holidays By national agreement there are two extra statutory days; which are taken during the Christmas holiday period.

(iv) Concessionary Holidays This Authority has granted one day as concessionary holiday to be taken on specified days during the Christmas holiday period.



*Entitlement to these days is not contractual and this leave may be withdrawn by the Authority. If the Council needs to be closed for an extra day during this period then two concessionary days will be granted.*

6. Although the main offices and depot buildings are closed, the contact centre provides telephone access and information to the public. Statutory services such as homelessness, building control, environmental health and enforcement are always provided through 'On call and standby' arrangements whereby employees are contacted and expected to respond in emergency situations. The Sheltered Housing service always provides visits and resident contact where required and emergency call out and contact arrangements are always in place including the out of hours contract with the PCT.
7. During the Christmas holiday period in 2007, a number of concerns were raised following complaints from the public, these were focussed on the refuse collection service. Some residents were unhappy that there had been a longer than normal period between collections. Elected Members have considered this feedback and expressed a desire that the Council provides greater continuity of service during the Christmas holiday period.
8. The Council is a public service provider and there is a need for more customer focussed approaches to service delivery to meet public expectations. The Council objectives and service priorities are driving service plans and ultimately service delivery to **"Deliver high quality services that represent best value and are accessible to all our community"**

#### **County-wide practices**

9. The HR Manager has contacted other local councils to ascertain policies and practices within the county.

**County Council** – Offices open and manned by skeleton staff. Statutory services (Childrens and Adult care) – full services are available but on reduced staffing.

**East Cambs** - Council offices are usually closed between Christmas and New Year are pm of 24th December, 25th & 26th and 1st January. The staff from the housing/homelessness section provide cover 24/7 - one of them is always contactable to try and sort out any problems after hours, weekends or bank holidays. With regard to refuse collection - this contract is outsourced. The contractors do not collect on Christmas day, Boxing Day or New Years Day, although recycling collections will stop for the week of 22nd - 26th December.

**Huntingdonshire DC** - main offices are closed for the whole Christmas and New Year period, although we continue to provide the "manual worker" functions, primarily refuse and recycling, on the days which are not public holidays, in which case the employees will add the extra-statutory days onto their leave entitlement.

**Fenland and City Councils** – open as per East Cambs arrangements

#### **Consultation**

10. SCDC staff have been advised of the proposed changes to normal Christmas holiday practices and consultation with both trade unions has taken place. The issue was also raised at the joint union/management meetings on 1 April and 13<sup>th</sup> May.
11. The feedback from local Unison representatives has indicated that there is a real strength of feeling from staff on this matter. 54 Unison members have sent a clear message that

this would be a very unpopular decision should the Council decide to change past practices. A resume of the feedback is attached at Appendix 1.

12. The corporate briefing to staff included an item covering the proposal. General responses from staff have been very negative with many comments against the decision to open the offices over the Christmas period.
13. One positive aspect of the proposal is in relation to those employees who follow other faiths. The option to work may enable this group of employees to utilise the extra statutory days to take time off to participate in their own special days and celebrations

### **Considerations**

14. Historically, civil servants, central and local government employees have been entitled to all public and bank holidays plus four extra days (2 extra statutory days and 2 concessionary days). Over time some employers have reduced this benefit to three extra days. Some local government employers have added the three days to employee's leave entitlement and others have used it to enforce closure at specific times of the year i.e. Christmas.
15. As part of the 2004/2005 local pay discussions, the then Chief Executive negotiated an agreement with staff representatives to reduce the number of extra days to two by withdrawing a concessionary day. Details of the negotiated agreement is at Appendix 2.
16. Elected Members have indicated that they would like to see a 'skeleton' staffing at the Cambourne office over the Christmas period with volunteers from public facing/business critical service areas, these include:
  - **Homelessness**
  - **Housing inc Sheltered Housing**
  - **Reception**
  - **Benefits**
  - **Revenues**
  - **Environmental services**
  - **Planning & Building Control**

The services would need to be supported by appropriate levels of ICT, caretaking, communications and facilities support. Health and safety considerations include the need to have an identified fire warden in case of emergency.

There will be costs associated with opening/ running the building (heating, electricity, refreshments facilities) for a very low number of employees.

17. Refuse collection services and support services at Waterbeach will be maintained and arrangements have already been discussed and agreed by the Corporate Manager Health and Environmental Services.
18. In the event that the Council is open for business on 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> December 2008, there would need to be data gathered on the number of visitors, phone calls and transactions so that a review of service access and provision could take place. This would inform future service provision for the same period next year.
19. A further consideration is one of employee wellbeing in that many individuals become 'run down' and susceptible to illness in the period before/during Christmas. The normal Christmas close down does provide a few days when individuals either succumb to the illness and recover or rest sufficiently to avoid illness, thus limiting the sickness absence impact on the organisation. The Council could experience an increase in self-certificated sickness during December and January.

20. There is a possibility that insufficient volunteers will come forward which will mean that managers will need to agree a fair means of ensuring adequate staff attendance.

**Options**

21. There are three variations in relation to this decision.
- a). To change past practice and require volunteers from service areas to provide a skeleton service during the Christmas period. The extra statutory days would be added to employee leave entitlement (to be used at a later date). The concessionary day will be used to close the office on Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> January.
  - b). To retain past practice of office closure using the extra statutory days and concessionary day. This would result in the offices being closed from 25<sup>th</sup> December to either Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> or Monday 5<sup>th</sup> January.
  - c). To close the main Cambourne offices but to require refuse and recycling services to provide waste collection services.

**Implications**

22	Financial	Costs associated with opening the building
	Legal	Provision of statutory services to the public. Health & Safety of staff
	Staffing	See body of the report
	Risk Management	See body of the report
	Equal Opportunities	See body of the report

**Effect on Corporate Objectives and Service Priorities**

23.	<b>Work in partnership to manage growth to benefit everyone in South Cambridgeshire now and in the future</b>
	None
	<b>Deliver high quality services that represent best value and are accessible to all our community</b>
	Improved service continuity over the holiday period leading to increase customer satisfaction and public access to services and information.
	<b>Enhance quality of life and build a sustainable South Cambridgeshire where everyone is proud to live and work</b>
	None

**Conclusions/ summary**

24. The decision to change current custom and practice in this instance will be a very emotive one. Staff feeling is very strong on this issue and feedback from staff briefings, union consultation substantiates the staff morale and feelings of being undervalued. However, this needs to be balanced against the increasing expectation of the public in terms of accessing information and Council services.

**Recommendations**

The Portfolio Holder is recommended to;

- a) consider the content of the report and
- b) indicate which option the Council is to adopt for the 2008/2009 Christmas period

**Background Papers:** the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

None

**Contact Officer:** Susan Gardner-Craig – HR Officer  
Telephone: (01954) 713285

## **APPENDIX 1 to the report to the Staffing Portfolio Holder**

### **Comments on Plans for the Council to open over the Christmas Period**

#### **Problems with arranging officer cover**

I have previously worked in a government office which opened between the Christmas and New Year period. Every year it caused problems with staffing levels, obviously everybody wanted to take annual leave for this period however there had to be 'skeleton staff' levels in place. Every year it caused problems and ended up that staff with children (for obvious reasons) were given priority for taking annual leave for this period which was very unfair for those without children. It was detrimental to staff morale every year as those who were denied leave were not happy with the situation.

There also needs to be a fair way of allocating leave over Christmas, whilst I appreciate those with children would like to take the time off, it can't always fall to those without children to man the office. There may be equal ops issues of allowing those with children to keep having those days off, department may need to have a rota system to ensure fairness.

My last Authority always opened over Christmas and New Year and it was always the same people who were required to work that period to maintain minimum cover, i.e. those without children, which is unfair.

I too agree that the council should reconsider this, I work in a service area that should the office be open then virtually all our staff would have to come in as we would have to supply support to the users and carry out the day to day tasks on the servers such as changing backup tapes.

The first question we need to ask is why have they left this so late in the year to review as this should have been done prior to last Christmas to take affect this year. At my previous place of employment we were advised in the first week of the year what the opening / closing hours for the office for the coming Christmas period. If they want to open up then they should adopt a similar process to give the officers ample notice. I myself have already booked to go away over the Christmas period which was done on the basis that the office closes until the New Year.

Is there support from staff to come in to work - otherwise there will be pressure to come in when you would rather not, just to ensure skeleton cover. Staff would start booking leave early in the leave year to ensure that they had the time off.

#### **Customer Demand**

I must also say it seemed very pointless opening, customers did not expect the office to be open so therefore customer levels were very low, also the staff who had no choice but to come in and work were not the most proactive what with the Christmas festivities being in full swing.

The building will be very quiet during that time and there doesnt seem to be a good reason for changing things. It seems like a very "mean" decision.

The service I work for provides an out of hours service via a contact centre so that the public can speak to an officer directly in the event of an emergency.

The public do not normally expect government buildings to be open. Will this be the "thin end of the wedge" and like shops we will be opening on Boxing Day if there is a "demand"?

### **A Valued Incentive**

I feel it would be greatly appreciated by all staff if the office were to close throughout the Christmas and New Year period as per normal, it is one of the benefits of working for the Council that we all appreciate and expect.

This is a highly valued SCDC benefit and one that we have all become used to. I personally benefit from a gap in work at that time of year as things are generally very frantic with people covering sickness etc.

This Christmas/New Year break is about the only "perk" staff have.

Coming to the Council (last October) from self-employment, I found not having to work over Christmas and being paid for it a welcome luxury.

### **Staff Morale**

I think its about time the staff were actually thought of first. The staff moral is lower than it has ever been.

We have the issue of staff morale, one of few perks being taken away combined with issue with those with children and not being forced to come in.

I saw the report and have to say I was quite shocked. It can't have escaped Management's attention that morale seems to be at an all time low here and yet still the staff strive to provide the best service we can with some sort of, it would seem, misguided loyalty because despite this here we are presented with another knock.

With many officers being stressed Christmas has been a welcome break to spend with family and friends to recharge the batteries and now this is under threat, and at a time when staff morale is at an all time low!!

### **Family**

I can agree that the council has been considered a family friendly employer but this proposal will blow this out of the water.

I have a young family and would not be happy about having to coming in to work over the Christmas holidays when their is no public demand.

I have two young children (I'm a single parent) and the extra days off at Christmas means I can spend real quality time with my kids over an important time of the year.

A colleague advises me (and you probably already know this) that there is generally no child care available between Christmas and New Year as they close down. This also applies to the building industry (who we have dealings with).

As in your original proposal, many families with children are going to struggle because many schools and nurseries are closed during this time, so there will be a lot of leave being booked, which will have a knock-on effect on staff without young children who will then be expected to cover for their colleagues.

### **Staff well-being**

The fact that the building is closed ensures that the real "workaholics" have a compulsory break - having the opportunity to "wind down" rather than facing potential health issues.

A lot of us deal with the public face to face....sometimes this is emotionally draining and has a detrimental effect on our mental well being. Flexi each month plus the knowledge that this authority recognises our efforts and encourages us all to have a good seasonal break at christmas enables us to catch our breath, re-group and return to work fighting fit.

I would be very disappointed if the previous arrangements for closing over Christmas were changed. Staff in housing put in a lot of unpaid extra hours over the year, and we arrange our leave and flexi-time hours to ensure office cover is maintained at all times. This was the one week of the year we could all take leave without feeling guilty about inconveniencing someone else when they wanted to be off. The amount of damage to staff morale far outweighs any benefits to our tenants if this proposal is adopted. Also - would we be losing part of our A/L entitlement?

The council should be working with its staff members to try to turn around the current feeling of being undervalued & to understand why we are feeling like this. There is still a lot of uncertainty for some staff and this is the last thing that is needed.

The expression 'getting blood out of a stone' springs to mind because how much more can we give? We are understaffed, overworked and rarely acknowledged - other than now when it would appear that our reward for working in such conditions is to squeeze a little bit more out during a time when we would all normally take a breather, enjoy time with our families and come back to work feeling slightly refreshed before we knuckle down again.

A lot of front line staff, and I'm one, look forward to this break in order to recharge their batteries, regroup and return to work fighting fit after an extremely busy year. With all the staff/organisational changes going on in the authority I would hope that management would give its staff a little bit more consideration and recognise their efforts and encourage us to enjoy the respite over the holiday, given that we are supposed to be Investors in People etc.

I fully concur with your response and feel that, for many loyal and hardworking staff, this could be the 'straw that broke the camel's back' - yet again a long standing arrangement, enjoyed by all levels of staff, being taken away.

**Misc**

I am concerned that this authority is on a course which attempts to remove "fringe benefits" from staff. Last year we had the flexi-time given back to us after an attempt to remove it completely. Investors in People!? I think not!

I totally agree with your memo they have taken every other perk away from the staff (including buses to work impending next week) Please let us at least have something left.

I am a visiting officer, and there is no way I would be welcome into someones home over this family holiday period, nor would I like to. I have a young family and if needed, will take annual leave. Holidays and bank holidays are minimal in this country compared to Europe, the public do not expect us to be open, some sections like Homeless are on call as always. SCDC cannot expect us to maintain the constant barrage of work, targets etc. without looking after staff and letting us let our hair down for a few days and recharge our batteries.

To be quite frank this authority does not make many concessions to it's staff, flexi time and Christmas holiday being about the only remaining things.

**Cost of keeping the building open**

This would also save money (electric, water etc) which I believe the council is still trying to achieve.

If there is a proposal to keep the building open at Christmas for the few people who may chose to come in between Christmas and New Year, it would be useful to see a breakdown of the cost of heating and lighting the building and supplying electricity to the PC's etc. relative to the amount of people who may come in! The question should be asked do management consider the degree of service that would be offered to the public by the few who may come in cost effective relative to the degree of service that could be offered to the public.

There must be cost implications eg. heating /lighting the building for limited staff use.

Efficient running of the building - it would cost more to heat the building.

**An unjustified proposal**

I feel that this is proposed on the back of the Refuse Collectors having to work through last year ie if they have to come in then everyone else does.

I understand this probably stems from the problems with the bins last christmas, but am unsure why they have chosen this view this year. was it just that the bin collection was badly publicised through the magazine? and we are all suffering for this failure. We have been on bi weekly bin collections for at least 4 years - why has this come up now?

We really need to know the objectives of why this is even being suggested. My previous experience of this was the result of the Chief Exec receiving one complaint from a visitor who found the office closed.

Has this occurred simply as a knee jerk reaction to the criticism the authority received in the local press regarding lack of bin collections over the last Christmas period. Surely just to improve the timing and have better publication of the bin collections over Christmas period would suffice rather than destroy any goodwill and morale that officers have.

Has this come about because "customers" are asking for it? Are there any records of how many people contacted the contact centre over Christmas/New Year?

Perhaps because I am still infected with that entrepreneurial sickness I would have no issue with coming in if it were agreed that this would be entirely necessary. My get-out is that I don't think it is. I deal with building contractors and carry out inspections of works. Builders will probably be on shutdown for longer than we are and I doubt if my public would welcome me coming 'round breaking up the family party!

What is the evidence for the proposal? The risk could be that we keep open just to be able to say that we are and in doing so we pay staff premium rates to be here and they end up doing nothing. Not necessarily good use of public money.



I would be interested to hear the reasons given for keeping it open, seeing as the Contact Centre will be open to deal with non-urgent issues and we already have arrangements for emergency cover for things like housing repairs, homelessness and environmental services.

Where has this idea come from and what is the basis behind it?

**Déjà vu**

There was a period of some 3 - 4 years at Hills Road when a similar exercise happened, based on volunteers. Whilst some staff welcomed the break from the festivities to get some work done in the quiet, it was quite clear that public did not use the facility in anything like the numbers to warrant the cost of keeping the building open. It was abandoned. Then of course we didn't have the Contact Centre. If that is open there is even less need to open HQ.

The Council has tried opening over Christmas when the offices were located in Cambridge, where the response was not even luke warm by customers and residents.

I recall when we were at Hills road, Cambridge. The offices used to be open within the Christmas to New Year Period, but the decision was made to close throughout because the Benefits Section and Revenues took very few telephone calls (2 or 3 a day max), had minimal counter visits. It cost more to stay open, pay staff, resources etc. than the administration it received.

I seem to remember that a past chief executive tried opening the offices between Christmas and New Year only to find it a waste of time and that was in a City.

I agree we should not open at Xmas having experienced it at Hills Road. It was a waste of time & effort as customers do not want to be bothered with bills etc at this time of year. Also Heating the whole building with very few staff in is completely wasteful.

In addition I would like to question the financial viability of opening and heating the Council office's for 'essential' staff. I remember only too well when this idea was implemented some years ago when the main offices were sited at Hills Road. As one who came in on those days (not having a family at the time) I found myself getting bored and frustrated as a) No new inquiries were coming in from the public as they are all aware that we close over that Christmas period and b) I was unable to contact other members of staff for information as the majority took that week as Leave. The only redeeming factor was the location of the offices so that at least lunchtime could be spent in Cambridge. Even that benefit has now been removed.

**What is meant by essential cover?**

Also have they considered staffing levels, first aiders (should we all choose to book leave?) reception - how will they cover if 1 of them wants to go on leave

I am really against the proposal, I don't feel that a skeleton staff can provide appropriate cover in the event of an emergency or incident at the offices.

Taking a general view I wonder what "essential staffing levels" actually means. Someone to answer the 'phone? Someone to move a minimum amount of paper around? In truth, if it is expected that asking staff to come in will contribute to productivity, I think it unlikely. If we are hoping to improve customer service it is possible that some of our customers will need some form of assistance but if

common sense prevails, shouldn't this need have already been identified and some provision already operational?

I would also be interested to hear the definition of "essential staffing levels", as in our particular case, Democratic Services, there will not be any agendas being published, minutes to be written or meetings being held, and we're unlikely to see any members visiting, so would there be any purpose to one of the six of us coming in?

During this period of closure the public will have access to council services using emergency numbers and the contact centre.

### **Benefits?**

The only benefit of me coming in would be to catch up with my backlog of work over a quiet period.

Opening for Christmas makes operational sense for collecting refuse and will offer a better service for our residents, however this is dependent on there being sufficient cover/number of crews working over Christmas. If the crews are expected to work, under single status it should apply equally across the Council so I would support the rest of us working if the crews have to.

To sum up I'm in favour of opening over Christmas as it gives a better service to our residents BUT ONLY IF, and it's a big if,

- It's done fairly, i.e. we all work (depot, HQ, sheltered housing etc) or none of us do,
- The leave for stat days which we would lose is added to our leave entitlement
- There is a fair system of allocating leave over the Christmas period (not first come first serve, and not those with children get priority)

### **One rule for them and one for us ...**

I myself last year came in after new year despite childcare difficulties my service manager was not, my corporate manager was not and the Chief Ex was not in.

I expect that no chief officers or corporate manager will be in!! if we open over Christmas.

Will SMT be in, covering the office?

If the decision is to open, I would like to see Councillors coming in for important meetings within this period - All or nothing, that's what I think!

### **Consequences of implementing this proposal**

If the council do remove this goodwill benefit I will instantly be looking for another job.

**From John Ballantyne : Pay Award 2004/2005**

Following negotiations with Unison, and agreement by Council yesterday (22 July), I am pleased to announce the pay award for 2004/2005.

As at national level, the pay award has been agreed as part of a package of measures. It ensures we remain competitive in what we pay, having just carried out the pay and grading review, and helps us continue to address recruitment and retention issues. The deal also recognises that more staffing capacity needs to be released within the organisation against the background of an increasingly difficult financial situation .

We will be working very closely with Unison to roll out this package of measures and I believe we have been successful in introducing a competitive pay award while addressing some of the capacity issues within the Council.

**The Pay Award**

A pay award of 4.2% from 1 April 2004. This rate is derived from the Office for National Statistics Average Earnings index. The pay award will be implemented in the August payroll, with the backdated pay to 1 April 2004 appearing in September's pay packets.

**New ways of working**

A commitment to reviewing the Council's approach to alternative forms of working, including the use of term time contracts and annualised hours, by March 2006.

**Flexi Time**

Changes to the flexible working hours policy.

(i) The current policy allows staff to adopt a pattern of working which affords flexibility to both employer and employee. It is not the intention to facilitate the accumulation of flexi leave and to reinforce this, the accumulation of flexi leave will be capped as follows:

Flexi-leave for 2004/2005 - capped at 8 days

Flexi-leave for 2005/2006 - capped at 6 days

Flexi-leave for 2006/2007 - capped at 4 days

Exceptions to the provision will require Chief Officer approval.

(ii) the removal of core hours will be subject to further consultation with Unison.

In the meantime, the existing provision for core hours will remain.

(iii) the introduction of a corporate time recording system.

**Holidays**

One concessionary day of annual leave will be withdrawn. This will take effect from the next leave year and therefore effect Christmas 2005. Where an extra day is required to close the Council offices between Christmas and New Year, the concessionary day will be reinstated for this purpose only.

**Overtime**

There will be a review of overtime arrangements.

If you have any queries on any of the above please speak to Human Resources or Unison.

**APPENDIX B**



Dear Cllr Batchelor,

**Council Office Christmas and New Year Closing Arrangements 2008/09**

I am writing to you on behalf of the UNISON Executive at South Cambs to request that you consider calling-in the above decision. It is our view that this decision contravenes three of the six principles of decision-making shown in paragraph 13.02 of the Constitution.

**(b) Due consultation and the taking of professional advice from officers**

The report states that 54 UNISON members have all voiced their opposition to this proposal and a summary of their comments was included in the appendix. The report also stated: "General responses from staff have been very negative with many comments against the decision to open the offices over the Christmas period." The report clearly showed that there were more arguments against this report than in favour. The views of the report writer and the staff who oppose the decision (also professional officers) have been ignored.

**(d) Presumption in favour of openness, helpfulness and consistency**

Staff with newer contracts will be able to continue to take their two statutory days between Christmas and New Year because their contracts state: "By national agreement there are two extra statutory days; which are taken during the Christmas holiday period." Those who have older contracts do not have this clause and so will need the agreement of their line manager to take leave during this time. This is unfair and inconsistent.

Incidentally, the decision to use the concessionary day to close the office on 2 January is inconsistent with the decision to open the office during a less busy time.

**(f) Consideration of available options and giving reasons for decisions**

No monitoring of the number of calls and visits made by residents during this period has been made or planned for, so there is no evidence that this will provide an improved service for residents.

In fact the reverse is true. When the office was opened during the Christmas period, approximately eight years ago, it was deemed a failure due to low demand. This was before the Council had a Contact Centre and when it was arguably more accessible to residents in the holiday period, as we were situated in Cambridge during the time of the post Christmas sales.

The current arrangement actually offers a better service to residents as it ensures that staff take leave at the least busy time of the year and so are available at other peak times. The cost of keeping the office open during this time is a bad use of tax payers' money.

**Benefit to staff**

The closure of the office during the Christmas period is a benefit greatly valued by staff. At the same meeting the portfolio holder received a report on the Employee Satisfaction Survey and expressed concern at the declining satisfaction rates. Nobody should be in any doubt that the decision to open the office during Boxing Day and New Year will exacerbate a deeply concerning situation.

In short if the Council cares about its staff it needs to rethink this decision.

Yours sincerely,

M Williams  
UNISON Branch Chairman

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