

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.