

# **STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**7 December 2022**

## **Council Questions**

### **1. Question to the Leader of the Council received from Councillor John Jones:**

“Why are hybrid meetings no longer being allowed?”

#### **Response:**

A full reply will be provided during the meeting.

### **2. Question to the Portfolio Holder for Customer Services received from Cllr Linda Malyon:**

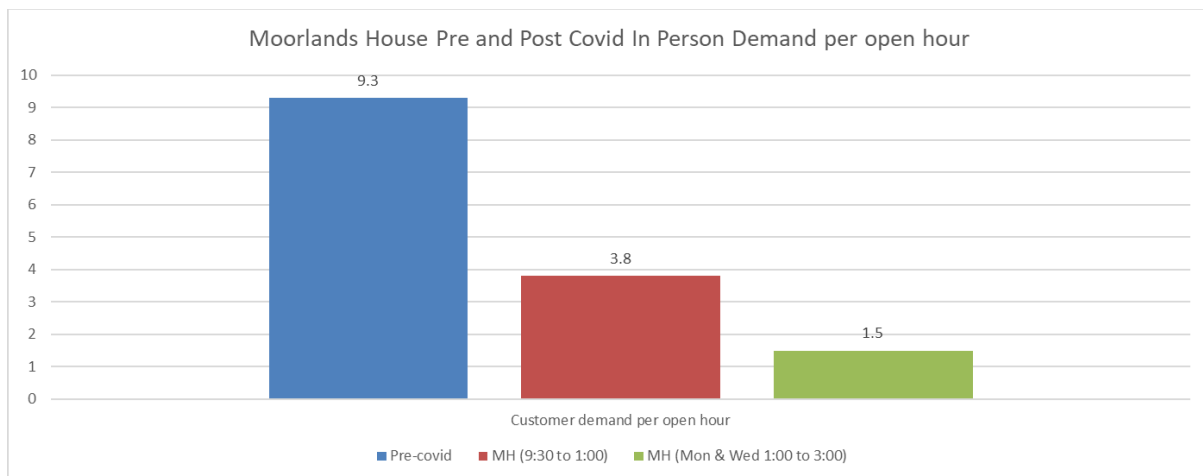
“When will the Council fully open the one stop shops so the public can access services and advice?”

#### **Response:**

“The public can access advice and services through many different means and locations including Biddulph Town Hall, Cheadle Library and Moorlands house as well as on the website, and via the telephone. As we have indicated to all councillors previously, from this week we are going to be opening Moorlands house until 3pm every day by re-allocating resources from the customer services team to the front of house operation. This will bring the hours the reception is open to 27½ (compared to 37½ hours pre-covid). As we have indicated in the email that has gone out, the trade-off for this is that people may experience slightly longer wait times on the phone as we’ve had to move staff out of that department. With regards to the one stop shops, we are assessing the demand at each location. We understand that some people have been visiting the one stop shops where they couldn’t access services face to face in Moorlands house, so the demand for this may vary slightly with the extension of those opening hours.

The customer services department is short of around 5 members of staff to be able to operate at full capacity, and this has been an ongoing problem since the pandemic where the labour market locally has not allowed us to fill those vacancies as quickly as we would like, a problem that is encountered by nearly every business in the Staffordshire Moorlands and beyond. Post-pandemic, it is taking some time to quantify the level of demand for any change and to set the correct level of resource back to one of seeing people and helping them face to face vs the virtual environment that lasted far too long. The opportunity to engage with the Council now over a wider variety of channels, however, does mean that all enquiries are being dealt with fully, and an outcome of the change to our lives through covid is that the populace has adapted to its engagement with the Council in the way we have all adapted to all manner of opportunities e-commerce presents. As an example, the pre-covid level of in-person enquiries being dealt with was c.350/week (9.3/hour).

Since extending the opening the Moorlands House opening hours at the beginning of October 2022, there were an average of 66 in person enquires during the 9:30am to 1:00pm period (3.8/hour) and 6 during the extra opening (to 3:00pm) on Monday and Wednesday (1.5/hour), a new demand of c.20% of the pre-covid levels.



The customer services team is the most 'in the office' team in the council by nature of the work, it is also the one that is most directly affected by small numbers of vacancies as it relies on the people to be available and ready to deal with enquiries, whether this is at Leek, or the one stop shops. This was picked up as an issue in May that had been plaguing the department for some while and, since then, I requested that the team re-double their efforts to find people to fill the vacancies which includes attending job fairs, Leek show, increased advertising of the vacancies, expansion of the apprenticeship program and we are now starting to see signs that this tide is turning and have been able to fill some vacancies more recently which have helped with us with being able to find the staff to re-deploy to get the Moorlands house reception open longer.

The one stop shop funding and budget is not sufficient for full time operation and, due to the problems highlighted above, we are unable to re-deploy any other staff from the team as we don't have the spare capacity to be able to staff all of it. If this is something that the Council wishes to operate going forwards as a fully staffed service to that extent, then I'd be more than happy to discuss the overall budget and I'm sure the portfolio holder for Finance would like to be involved in order that we can establish what the budget priorities are and, if we agree as a council that having the one stop reception areas open on a more full time basis, then we have no objection in principle to that happening.

Even if we do increase the budget however, we will still be faced with the recruitment situation that we are seeing everywhere which may make that difficult to achieve in the immediate term. If any councillors would like to suggest any alternative things we can do to quickly get the staff we would need, even on a temporary basis, we would be more than happy to work together and listen to the ideas."

### 3. Question to the Portfolio Holder for Tourism received from Councillor Connor Brady:

“According to a ThinkBroadband report on broadband coverage and speeds for UK constituencies in Q1 of 2022, the Staffordshire Moorlands ranks 609 out of 650 for the percentage of premises covered by superfast broadband (30mbps) at 90.4%. This ranks below all other Staffordshire constituencies including Cannock Chase, Stafford, and Stoke constituencies.

What action is the District Council taking, with the County Council, in order to give every house in our towns and villages high speed broadband?”

#### Response:

“Staffordshire Moorlands Councillors and Officers work with Staffordshire County Council to champion our rural areas.

Staffordshire County Council have responsibility for delivering Digital Infrastructure through Gigafaststaffordshire: [www.gigafaststaffordshire.co.uk](http://www.gigafaststaffordshire.co.uk)

<https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk/> we signpost business and community enquiries to this service and raise awareness through the Business Newsletter when new opportunities arise.

We also signpost business enquiries to Staffordshire Digital Innovation Partnership who work with sme`s to improve their digital profile.

<https://www.staffs.ac.uk/business-services/funding/staffordshire-digital-innovation-partnerships-sdips-1>

To give some context the information on coverage is below.

Staffordshire: [Broadband Coverage and Speed Test Statistics for Staffordshire \(thinkbroadband.com\)](http://thinkbroadband.com)

Staffordshire Moorlands: [Broadband Coverage and Speed Test Statistics for Staffordshire Moorlands \(thinkbroadband.com\)](http://thinkbroadband.com)

The best way to summarise this data is as follows:-

	Staffordshire	Staffordshire Moorlands
Superfast broadband coverage (>30Mbps):	96.65%	92.03%
Gigabit capable (≥ 1,000Mbps):	62.36%	34.10%
Full Fibre:	33.09%	10.21%
USO eligible (<10Mbps):	1.23%	3.53%

The next step in improving speeds across Staffordshire Moorlands is through Project Gigabit which is delivered by Staffordshire County Council. BDUK are currently redesigning the procurement approach to attract interest of more suppliers. UK Gigabit Voucher is being updated and relaunched to support upgrade opportunities

for the foreseeable future, when this is relaunched we will provide information through our Business Newsletter and signpost enquiries.

[Staffordshire Public Review closure notice - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/staffordshire-public-review-closure-notice)

[Project Gigabit Delivery Plan - summer update 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/project-gigabit-delivery-plan-summer-update-2022)

It is anticipated that 80% of the gigabit capable coverage will be supplied through commercial activity which is currently underway. As this is commercial activity we have limited influence on the areas serviced. Project Gigabit will be supported by public intervention to fill the commercial gaps which are evident in the District.

Our main support mechanism is to signpost to the mainstream delivery agents.

Moving forward when we receive the UK Shared Prosperity Funding there is budget allocated in the Investment Plan for delivery of Investment and support for digital infrastructure for local community facilities. This will be developed and procured through the UKSPF Board over the coming months to support communities and businesses across the District.

BDUK have published [A Councillor's Guide to Project Gigabit - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-councillors-guide-to-project-gigabit) that may be a useful resource."

**4. Question to the Portfolio Holder for Communities received from Cllr Nigel Yates:**

"Can further clarification be given on the Covid Recovery Fund in respect of the amount available (unallocated/unspent) in the fund, details of spending to date and the potential purposes of the fund now that it can be linked to Cost of Living matters?"

**Response:**

"The Covid Recovery Fund was established at the end of 2019/20 to 'create a new reserve to fund future costs of the Covid-19 recovery programme'. The reserve exists to provide for the situation where **the Council incurs costs or loses revenue** as a result of the lasting effects of the pandemic. No costs have been charged to the reserve to date and, consequently, the reserve still has a balance of £600,000. This reserve remains earmarked for any impacts of Coronavirus on the Council's finances."

**5. Question to the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change received from Councillor Andrew Hart:**

"Having read the report and Information Digest for the Community Orchards project can the Portfolio Holder explain why there is no reference to costs incurred by AES?"

**Response:**

“The report highlights the additional costs to the Council. The work carried out by AES took place under the ‘Business as Usual’ agreed services that form part of the service specification agreed with AES at its conception.”