The Highland Council

Customer Service Consultation

Individual and Community Group Feedback

April 2015

Contents

Introduction

Customer Services has 35 Service Points providing face to face contact located across Highland, as well as a Service Centre in Alness and a Digital Service Team based in Inverness. The Council regularly reviews how customers are accessing services to ensure that we continue to meet the needs of the public.

Over recent years there has been a change in how customers access Council services: fewer customers are visiting Service Points and more are choosing to telephone or email us. In March 2014 the Council agreed to implement a review of Service Point provision across Highland. This review could make savings of up to £355,220 with around £195,000 of this being re-invested to improve telephone and online services.

The Council intends to retain face to face provision in 13 locations through Community Hubs. Community Hubs will offer the full range of services as per our current Service Points, and we will continue to offer dedicated appointments for essential services to ensure our customers get a pre-arranged appointment.

The 13 proposed Community Hubs are: Inverness Church Street, Nairn, Aviemore, Dingwall, Alness, Tain, Golspie, Wick, Thurso, Ullapool, Portree, Fort William and Kyle of Lochalsh.

What has been done so far

The Customer Services Board has been investigating how we could potentially work in partnership with others, such as Highlife Highland and Police Scotland, as well as looking at how Service Points are currently used.

The Board has agreed six principles to guide its work:

1. One solution will not suit all communities and we need to look at each community to understand how Service Points are used and opportunities for local service delivery;
2. It is about providing services not keeping buildings where appropriate, not assuming that the current Service Points are in the right location;
3. Need to offer a face to face point of contact for those who do not want to or cannot use technology, or for more complex enquiries;
4. Consider potential for moving work out to support staff working from home or local locations;
5. Adopting an appointment based Registration Service to enable a mobile service to replace a dedicated Registrar in certain locations;
6. Proposals for dealing with complex enquiries and confidential issues in an environment where there is not a dedicated Service Point e.g. library, thinking about use of technology to link to officers in other locations

The consultation process

Based upon the principles outlined, the Customer Services Board developed proposals for the future delivery of customer services in 22 locations across Highland. Prior to taking any decision, the Board thought it important to hear the views of the people that live in the areas affected and use these Service Points in order to understand how any changes may impact upon communities, and also what alternative options communities may wish to suggest.

The consultation was launched on 22 January and ran until 19 March 2015. A questionnaire, outlining the proposals and asking 6 key questions was available locally in service points and libraries. It was also available to complete online on the Council's website. A separate consultation response form was developed and circulated to key community groups and Community Councils.

During the consultation period a series of focus groups or telephone interviews were also held in each of the 22 locations in order to understand the direct experience of users of the offices affected. The findings from the focus groups and telephone interviews are available in a separate report.

This report outlines the views of individuals responding to the consultation, as well as community groups and Community Councils. The views of each are summarised under the question headings but are also presented by Service Point. The views of local members, collated during Ward Business Meetings are also presented. The final section of the report provides the analysis of the feedback collated during the Council's Budget Consultation process where the public were asked about the Customer Service Review principles.

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Summary of key findings

Respondents, both individuals and groups, were divided over the principles.

- There was strong support for principle 3 – the need for face to face services – particularly for those who do not have access or are unable to use alternative communication.
- There was concern expressed over the principle relating to the mobile registrar. Some of this appears to stem from confusion with regards how this may work within communities but underpinning this was the belief that people should not have to wait nor travel significant distances in order to register a death.
- From the responses received from individuals, it is clear clarity is needed on principles 4 and 5 as respondents interpreted these in a variety of ways.

In the main, groups and individual respondents indicated they disliked the proposals.

- Respondents were concerned about the distance they would need to travel in the future to access a face to face service and the lack of public transport available to make these journeys.
- Concerns were also expressed about the impact the change would have on vulnerable groups within the community, in particular on the elderly and disabled, the loss of a local service and the proposed location for the access point.
- Some community groups also questioned whether the proposals would result in savings and expressed concern at what they see as the centralisation of Council services.

Overall, the proposals were seen by individuals and groups as having a negative impact upon individuals and the wider community.

- Reasons for this again focused upon the likely impact upon individuals, particularly vulnerable individuals, no longer being able to access a service due to travel difficulties or being unable to utilise technology. It was noted that particularly for some elderly individuals, the importance of knowing and trusting someone with your business was extremely important.
- Further concerns noted were the potential impact upon the community and the potential impact of the loss of service within a fragile community. Related to this were concerns around the economic impact and the loss of direct jobs from the rural community but also the potential knock on effect on other business within the area.

It was reported that the relationship between individuals, communities and the Council was likely to deteriorate due to the current proposals.

- Respondents thought there would be less communication between communities and the Council if Service Points were closed. They suggested there would be an increase in ill-feeling towards the Council as communities would feel isolated and abandoned.
- Community Groups also noted particular concerns for individuals who could become disengaged with the Council and not seek the assistance or help they need. Concern was reported that the vulnerable would become more vulnerable.

Many respondents suggested that the key way to overcome the difficulties highlighted would be to retain Service Points in their current form.

- Some respondents did suggest alternative ways of providing the service, in the main these focused on ways to avoid the need for customers in rural communities to travel e.g. using village halls for contact, home visits or a full mobile service.
- A small number of respondents reported that having an appointment based system could help overcome difficulties, especially knowing where and when to be able to access specialist services
- The most common suggestion for alternative service provision was co-locating with other services for example with the police, hospital or school.
- Some of the groups responding suggested that opening hours could be revised and also decentralising work to Service Points in order to make them more sustainable.

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Section 1 - Individual Responses

The Customer Services consultation for individual feedback was available online via the Highland Council website or on paper via Service Points and Libraries.

In total, 210 responses to the consultation were received. The number of responses relating to each Service Point was:

Area	No.	%	Area	No.	%
Dornoch	82	39%	Fortrose	2	1%
Kingussie	23	11%	Lairg	2	1%
Gairloch	22	10%	Portree	2	1%
Invergordon	14	7%	All Service Points	2	1%
Lochcarron	11	5%	Grantown and Kingussie	2	1%
Kyle of Lochalsh	7	3%	Muir of Ord	2	1%
Bonar Bridge	5	2%	Aviemore, Kingussie and Grantown	1	0.5%
Grantown	5	2%	Durness	1	0.5%
Brora	5	2%	Hilton	1	0.5%
None	5	2%	Thurso	1	0.5%
Broadford	4	2%	Bettyhill	1	0.5%
Lochinver	4	2%	Fort Augustus	1	0.5%
Helmsdale	4	2%	Inverness	1	0.5%

*Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding

Of the affected Service Points, no responses were received in relation to the Acharacle, Ardersier, Kinlochleven or Mallaig offices.

Some individuals noted that they were responding about all Service Points whilst others did not detail any specific office. In the Badenoch and Strathspey area, 3 respondents chose to respond on all affected offices within the area. Responses were also received about offices not directly impacted by the proposals, namely Portree, Inverness, Kyle of Lochalsh and Thurso.

Gender

118 respondents were females (56%), 82 respondents were male (39%) and 10 respondents chose not to disclose their gender (5%).

Age

9 respondents were aged 16-34 (4%), 37 respondents were aged 35-55 (18%), 43 respondents were aged 55-64 (20%), 114 respondents were aged 64+ (54%) and 7 respondents did not disclose their age (3%).

Disability

148 respondents did not have a disability (70%), 47 respondents have a disability (22%) and 15 respondents did not disclose whether or not they have a disability (7%).

It should be noted that the number of people responding reporting that they have a disability is high at just over a fifth. Over half of all respondents also noted that they were over 64. It is difficult to draw firm conclusions from this however it is anecdotally reported that the user group of Service Points is traditionally older individuals and people with a disability. The response pattern may be reflective of that trend.

Reason for using the Service Point

Respondents were able to provide multiple reasons for using service points. Only 12 individuals reported that they did not use the Service Point. The most common reason was to apply for a concessionary fare pass closely followed by registering an event. Assistance with housing benefit or Council tax also ranked high.

To make a payment for rent, Council tax or other bill	91	Request a bulky uplift	76
To get assistance with a housing benefit or Council tax query	100	Request Free School Meals	10
Register an event	124	Apply for a concessionary fare pass	129
Report a change in circumstances	97	I do not use the Service Point	12

Other common reasons for using the Service Point included advice and enquiries about 'other issues'; for bus timetables and booking buses; for Tourist Information; reporting repairs; picking up dog bags; applying for a Blue Badge; visiting the Citizens' Advice Bureau, and; photocopying and submitting documents to the Council.

Less common reasons for using the Service Point were to discuss local events; to visit the library; to use the computer; holding meetings; for social interaction; to apply for licenses; to make a complaint; to pick up keys for local public buildings; for police matters; for contact details for Councillors; for Council grant information; to apply to the Credit Union; for genealogy enquiries; for services 'concerned with death'; to apply for a passport; to request a new wheelie bin; to meet with a planning officer, and; to view planning applications.

Some respondents also used this opportunity to mention that although they do not use the Service Point now, they might need to in the future, and others said that although they do not use the Service Point, they can see the good service it offers other people.

Question 1: What do you think about the 6 principles listed in Section 2?

There is support for some of the 6 principles but there were also concerns and questions. There was the greatest level of support for Principle 3 as this focusses on maintaining face to face services.

More respondents stated that they agreed with all the principles than said they disagreed with all of the principles (although some did say they only agree with them in theory). Some respondents said that although the principles seem OK, if they will lead to the closure of any services then they do not agree with them.

When considering the 6 principles together, respondents felt that the overall aim seemed to be to save money rather than to improve customer services.

There was concern that the principles would result in an over-reliance on technology, i.e. computers and telephones. Respondents believed we should not be reliant on technology as many older people cannot use it and technology is not reliable in rural areas.

Some respondents were concerned about the wider impacts of these proposals, such as the economic impact they could have in an area. This was mostly a concern in Dornoch. Some also felt that the proposals were simply an excuse to close the Service Points and that this decision had already been made.

There were some other comments about the proposals: the principles have led to more Community Hubs on the East coast than on the West coast; people may not understand the principles properly; the principles will result in remote areas taking the biggest hit; they will lead to a depersonalisation of Council services; they will lead to centralisation; some people do want more online services and the current Service Points are too expensive to run, and; the principles appear contradictory.

Below, the support and concerns surrounding each principle are outlined.

Principle 1: One solution will not suit all communities and we need to look at each community to understand how Service Points are used and opportunities for local service delivery

There was support for this proposal as respondents agreed that every community has different needs which will need to be considered. The geography of an area, including outlying villages, as well as public transport links were seen as particularly important areas to consider. Respondents from Dornoch also highlighted the importance of considering tourism in their area. One respondent felt that the views of people living in each community should take priority over any other considerations.

However some respondents did not believe that the Council would adhere to this principle when making decisions. One respondent noted that it would take a lot of time and money to thoroughly consider the opportunities for each community, and that this would cancel out any savings the Council plans to make through this review.

Some respondents did not agree with this principle as they believed that all communities need to have access to all of the same services. The Service Point will help to retain a sense in community in villages.

Principle 2: It is about providing services not keeping buildings where appropriate, not assuming that the current Service Points are in the right location

There was support for this proposal, however respondents from Lochcarron, Gairloch and Dornoch felt that their current Service Point is already in the right location and so should not be removed. One respondent felt that the Invergordon Service Point is not currently in the right location as it is on the edge of the town centre. Respondents from Gairloch also noted that they currently share the Service Point with the Police and that this is a cost effective solution that is working well for their community.

Some respondents felt that consideration does need to be given to buildings, as Service Points need to be central and easy to access for all. Some respondents stated they wanted a dedicated building for their Service Point. Others suggested making use of other suitable buildings in the community, such as the Court House in Kingussie. It was noted that the term 'right location' is subjective, and one respondent was concerned that this principle could result in the centralisation of services.

Principle 3: Need to offer a face to face point of contact for those who do not want to or cannot use technology, or for more complex enquiries

Many respondents agreed that maintaining face to face services is essential. It was suggested that this was particularly important for certain groups, such as the elderly, people with disabilities, people on low incomes and people without access to technology. It was highlighted that only providing telephone and online services would be a barrier to many people (specifically the groups noted above).

Respondents felt that face to face services need to be maintained in all communities as it is so important. They also noted the importance of having a known local, experienced member of staff.

Some respondents also stated that face to face services are important to everyone, not just specific groups. One respondent noted that they are computer literate but would still feel more comfortable dealing with important, confidential issues face to face rather than completing a form online.

Principle 4: Consider potential for moving work out to support staff working from home or local locations

More people disagreed with this than agreed with it, but there did seem to be some confusion over what this principle was referring to. Some respondents were concerned that this would mean members of the public visiting staff members' home for services, whereas others were concerned about the safety and appropriateness of staff making home visits to members of the public.

Some respondents did not agree with this principle as they felt it was removing local staff from providing face to face services. They felt that if staff are still going to be located in local areas then they should stay working at the Service Point. However there was an understanding that some types of administrative work can be done from home.

There were some other comments about this principle: staff would have to do more work for less money; it would incur significant costs; there would be confidentiality problems, and; the Council should be focussing on providing customer services.

Principle 5: Adopting an appointment based Registration Service to enable a mobile service to replace a dedicated Registrar in certain locations

More respondents disagreed than agreed with this principle, and again there was some confusion about what this principle would mean in terms of how the Registration service would be delivered. Some respondents thought this would mean a Registrar making home visits; some thought this would mean a Registrar visiting

an area at a set time and place each week; some were concerned that there would be a long wait for an appointment with the Registrar.

The most common concern was the cost associated with a mobile service compared to a dedicated local Registrar. These costs could include the cost of a vehicle or van, as well as the cost of petrol.

Another common concern was that it is inappropriate to ask grieving people to wait for an appointment or to travel long distances to a Community Hub for an appointment. It was highlighted that people do not die by appointment, and there were concerns that it would not be possible to register a death within the required time limit. Appointments were seen as an extra layer of bureaucracy and it was suggested they would not work in practice. However, a small minority thought that appointments would work well.

There were also concerns about how well a mobile service could work in rural area, especially where road networks are poor and the population is dispersed. Some respondents wanted to know more about where the mobile Registrar would visit and if this would be a confidential, sheltered space. However, again there was a small minority who thought a mobile service would be desirable as it would mean the bereaved would not have to travel.

There were some other comments about this principle: would Registrars be available on very short notice; would all Registrars be willing to travel; has the carbon footprint of this travel been considered; would there be a reliance on broadband which can be limited in rural areas; appointments would break community spirit, and; Registrars also provide information to genealogy researchers and so access to this service would also be affected.

Principle 6: Proposals for dealing with complex enquiries and confidential issues in an environment where there is not a dedicated Service Point e.g. library, thinking about use of technology to link to officers in other locations

Respondents were clear that a confidential meeting space is essential for many people who visit the Service Point. It was suggested that the public library is not suitable and it is not appropriate for enquiries to be dealt with over such a public desk.

There was also concern about the use of technology to link to other officers as this would not suit clients who are not computer literate, who tend to be older people or those with disabilities. In many cases a member of staff would be needed to help assist people to use technology, therefore cancelling out any staff savings.

There were some other comments about this principle: face to face interaction is essential for complex and confidential enquiries; if premises are shared there could

be a lack of privacy; confidentiality can only be guaranteed through face to face interaction, and; it is unclear what this principle means as it is a poorly written sentence.

Q2: What do you like/dislike about the proposals for your local area?

The majority of responses to this question outlined why respondents did not like the proposals for their local area.

Travelling to the Community Hub

The most common concern was the distance that people would need to travel to reach their nearest Community Hub. Some respondents outlined the distance they would have to travel and these distances ranged from 25 mile round trips to 130 mile round trips. The other major concern was the lack of local public transport to make these journeys. Respondents noted that in some areas it would take a whole day to visit the Community Hub for what could be a ten minute enquiry, due to the lack of public transport. One respondent noted that there is only one bus a week from Gairloch to Ullapool and so it would not be possible to reach the Community Hub any more frequently. Respondents were also concerned about the cost of this travel, and expressed that this may be prohibitive to some (whether people are using public or private transport).

Respondents were also concerned that some people may not physically be able to make the journey to their nearest Community Hub. This may be because the journey is too long or being physically unable to get on a bus. Some respondents noted they would have to rely on family members to take them and that they did not want to be a burden. One respondent highlighted that there could be an increase in the number of isolated elderly people if they could no longer visit their local Service Point.

Some respondents highlighted that their local roads are frequently closed and others noted that during the winter it can be too dangerous to drive.

It was also noted that people who work full time may not be able to access the Community Hub without taking time off work to travel.

Loss of local service

Respondents disliked that they were losing face to face services with a known, trained professional in their local area. Face to face services are seen as very important, especially to older members of the community, and respondents stated that the Council cannot remove services from the people that need them most.

Respondents noted that the proposal felt like another service being removed from the community (some mentioned the removal of Sheriff Courts, Post Offices and Police Stations over recent years) and felt like it was 'killing the community'.

Respondents also disliked the loss of their local Registrar, the loss of jobs to the local area and the loss of the dedicated Service Point building. Some respondents feel like the proposals will lead to a decrease in access to services, particularly in rural areas.

Access Point

Respondents were unhappy about having to use the library as their Access Point. They were concerned that this would lead to a reduction in opening hours, as libraries are not open as frequently as the Service Point. Respondents were also concerned about a lack of privacy in the library. Some specifically mentioned there is no private room available in their local library or that the private space is upstairs so is not accessible to all, and others said they would feel uncomfortable talking about their query over the library desk.

Some respondents felt that their local library is simply too small or too busy to accommodate an Access Point. Some also said that the library is not very accessible to people with mobility problems.

Respondents were also concerned about who would be providing service in the Access Point- would it be the librarian? Some felt that it would not be appropriate for librarians to take on this role as they are already very busy, and they would also require extra training.

There were specific concerns in Gairloch about the proposal to use the school library as the Access Point. The opening hours are very limited, particularly during school holidays, and it was generally felt to be inappropriate to have the Access Point within the school.

Increased use of technology and telephone services

Respondents felt that offering alternative services online and via the telephone was not a suitable alternative for many people, particularly the elderly. They noted that older people are less likely to be able to use a computer and may have hearing difficulties. Also, some people may simply not want to use technology.

Some respondents noted that bad weather can affect broadband and telephone lines meaning that these services may be less available during the winter. It was also highlighted that many areas outside of Inverness have very poor broadband speeds and these would need to be vastly improved before the Council relies on online services. One respondent felt that the Council has a poor track record when it comes to technological support and another felt that central call centres are not as effective as speaking to someone locally.

Costs

Some respondents noted that they disliked the proposals as they could not see where any savings would be made. It was specifically highlighted that the proposal of a mobile service would be more expensive, particularly in rural areas with dispersed populations.

It was also noted by some respondents that it appeared that costs were being passed on to the public, through the need to travel to access a Community Hub or to make use of online and telephone services.

Specifically in Kingussie, respondents highlighted the money that is being spent on the new Court House and felt that this building should be utilised by providing a Community Hub for customer services.

Other comments

Respondents in Dornoch disliked that the proposals did not take into account the high number of tourists that visit the area every year. They wanted to know if the Tourist Information Point would also move to the library, and if it did, they were concerned that the library would not be able to cope with the large numbers using it. They were also concerned about the wider impact on the local economy if the number of tourists was to decrease.

Some respondents simply stated that the current service in their area is working well and so it should not be changed.

Some respondents felt that the current proposal was too vague and so they could not comment fully on what they liked or disliked about it.

Other reasons why respondents disliked the proposals were: it is another service being centralised; the further reduction in payment options is frustrating; the Community Hubs will be too busy with extra users from other areas, and; home working will not work.

A small number of respondents outlined what they liked about the proposals for their local area. Respondents in Kyle stated that they were happy that the Community Hub was being retained in their area.

Some respondents from Kingussie were pleased that the Access Point would be located in the Court House as this was felt to be a suitable location.

Some respondents were happy for services to be provided through the local library, and others felt that the proposal would make services easier to access.

Other reasons why respondents liked the proposal were: there is too much money currently being spent on Service Points; it will help to standardise an inconsistent service; it is good that the Council is trying to improve the customer services system, and; improved online access will be more convenient for some people.

Q3: How would the proposal for your area impact upon you/ your community?

The vast majority of answers to this question outlined negative impacts, apart from a very small number of respondents noting that if online services were improved then this would have a positive impact on them. The impacts have been grouped into main themes which are outlined below.

Reduction in access to services

Respondents felt that the proposal for their area would result in a reduction in access to services which would have a negative impact. They stated that many cannot or do not want to use online and telephone services and so these people would not be able to access as many services. One respondent stated that "*faceless people at the end of a phone call or email is not doing favours for either party*". This is more likely to affect older people living in the community.

Respondents were also concerned about the reduced access to face to face services in their community. They outlined that speaking with someone face to face can offer reassurance and give confidence that their problem is being dealt with. Service Point staff also offer assistance in filling in forms, and the removal of this help would detrimentally affect some people within the community.

Some respondents also noted that they would not be able to access services as easily due to the poor provision of public transport in their area to take them to their nearest Community Hub. It was also highlighted again that some people, particularly the elderly and people with disabilities, cannot use public transport at all so these people will have fewer services available to them.

Some respondents highlighted that if their local Access Point was to be in the library then there would be reduced access as library opening hours tend to be much shorter.

There was also some concern that it would take longer to get things sorted if they cannot be dealt with face to face. One respondent noted that if the proposal in their area was to go ahead then the Council "*would cease to supply what the community needs and expects*". However, another respondent noted that the Council needs to make savings and so communities will just have to manage.

Respondents from Dornoch noted that the loss of the Service Point would have a detrimental effect on their local economy, which is heavily reliant on tourists. Some respondents in this area specifically noted that the loss of the local Registrar could lead to a decrease in weddings in the area, which would affect many local businesses.

Community impact

Respondents felt that the proposals would have a detrimental effect on their community. Many respondents stated that their community is already fragile and the removal of the Service Point will threaten the area further. Again, some respondents noted the recent closures of Sheriff Courts, Police Stations and other Council offices.

Some respondents stated that the proposals would make Highland Council more distant to the community and communities would feel like the Council was not interested in them, or was letting them down. It was suggested this would be felt particularly in rural areas.

Respondents also highlighted that the proposal could result in a job loss in their local area and that it could drive people out of the area or deter people from moving in.

Some respondents noted that people use the Service Point to report problems in their local area, such as pot holes, and if this service was removed then people would be less likely to report these small issues. This would then lead to areas "going downhill" which would be detrimental for the whole community. It was also suggested that the Service Point is currently a place where people can meet and talk to other people so this meeting place would be lost. One respondent was concerned that if the Service Point was to close then the viability of the library would be threatened.

Individual impact

Respondents suggested that elderly people would be affected the most by the proposals. There were concerns that the closure of the Service Point would affect the independence of many older people, especially those without family living locally. Older people were least likely to be able to make use of online and telephone services, or be able to travel to a Community Hub.

Respondents were also unhappy at the prospect of having to talk to a stranger about their issues, whether this is over the phone or in the Community Hub. They felt less able to trust these members of staff and were also concerned that they would be less capable of sorting out local problems.

Respondents also highlighted that for many there would now be a cost associated with accessing services. This could be the cost of travelling to a Community Hub or the cost of making calls to the Service Centre.

Some respondents were concerned about confidentiality, and did not trust that they would receive as private a service as they currently do. Others were concerned that there would be a longer wait to see a Registrar and that this would be particularly distressing for bereaved families.

Respondents were also concerned about the impact the proposals could have on Council tenants, as tenants often need to visit the Service Point to show documentation and to pay their rent.

Some respondents outlined how they would personally be affected by the proposals. Some were concerned that they would be more isolated and that they would not be able to manage without the support of Service Point staff. One respondent noted they would feel depressed and another that they would be stressed. It was also noted that visiting the Service Point is the only social contact some people will have each week. It can be used as a social meeting place and its removal would lead to increased feelings of isolation.

Travelling to access services

Respondents felt that having to travel to access their nearest Community Hub would have a detrimental impact on them. Some respondents highlighted that it would be particularly difficult to reach the Community Hub in winter when road conditions tend to be quite bad, and others noted that they would have to rely on relatives and neighbours to drive them to the Hub as they cannot use public transport. One respondent also noted the hassle of having to wait around for public transport, particularly in winter.

Q4: How will it change the way you/your community interact with the Council?

The majority of answers to this question expressed concern that the proposals would negatively affect how communities interact with the Council. However, it should also be noted that a small number of respondents did not think it would change their interaction or thought it could change it positively.

Interacting with the Council

Respondents felt that the proposals would reduce the number of interactions residents have with the Council. This was for reasons outlined in previous questions, such as being unable to travel long distances to the Community Hub, being unable to use online and telephone services or not wanting to use online and telephone services.

Respondents thought that the proposals would make it more difficult to interact with the Council and that this could result in people waiting longer to report or discuss

problems. This could lead to the deterioration of a community but could also lead to people getting into Council tax or rent arrears if they are no longer able to discuss problems with their local Service Point worker.

Feelings towards the Council

Respondents felt that closing the Service Point would remove the last point of contact with the Council in their community and so the Council would become increasingly distant and remote, and unable to understand the needs of communities across Highland.

Respondents also stated that it would increase ill-feeling towards the Council (which is already there in some communities) and would damage the reputation of the Council in rural areas. It would also lead to feelings of isolation and abandonment, as if the Council does not care about what is happening in rural communities. Some respondents said it would erode the public's trust in the Council, and others said it would make them want to stop paying their Council tax as they feel it is not fair to pay the same as people in Inverness who are receiving more services.

Some respondents also noted that it felt as though the Council were removing a safety net and increasing the gap between the vulnerable members of society and the Council.

Using online and telephone services

Some respondents stated they found it very frustrating to use telephone services and it can feel like you're being 'fobbed off'. It is as though your problem is not taken as seriously over the phone.

Other respondents noted that they find it difficult to use telephone services. Some are hard of hearing and some find it hard to explain things properly over the phone.

It was suggested that telephone and online services need to be more straightforward if more people are going to be asked to use them more.

There were also concerns that it would take longer to sort problems and that if numerous calls and letters are needed for more complex enquiries then this could prove costly to the public.

Deterioration of service

Some respondents felt that the customer service would deteriorate and become less personal. There were concerns about a lack of private space for Registrations.

There were some other comments relating to how the proposal could change how people interact with the Council: there could be increased dependence on other Council services, such as care services; it will kill the community; it will be more inconvenient to access services, and; what happens if an appointment is missed.

Q5: Do you think it will improve customer services or cause difficulties to any people or groups of people, and if so how could these be overcome?

Respondents felt that the proposals would not improve customer services and that they would cause difficulties for many people. The groups that the proposals could cause most difficulty for were the elderly, vulnerable, disabled, people on low incomes, young families and the homeless.

The reasons why the proposals would cause difficulties are the same concerns that have been outlined in previous questions. Respondents felt that the elderly in particular would struggle with the move to online and telephone services, as this group tend to be less able to use these methods. Poor broadband coverage would also make online services difficult for people who are IT literate. Respondents also felt the proposals would cause difficulties for people without their own transport and those that are unable to make long journeys. Distance would also be an issue for working people who may have to take time off to visit a Community Hub out with their local area.

Respondents again highlighted the importance of local face to face contact and reiterated that this cannot be replaced by faceless online and telephone services.

Respondents were also concerned that the proposals would add an additional cost to the people who are least likely to be able to pay.

Some respondents also highlighted that the proposals could cause distress if enquiries cannot be dealt with face to face, particularly bereaved families if they are expected to wait or travel for an appointment with a Registrar. It was also suggested that people often go to the Service Point when they don't know where else to look for help.

Other ways in which the proposals could cause difficulties were: busy Community Hubs would mean longer waiting times; services will be more difficult to access for everyone but particularly those in rural locations; there won't be any customer services to speak of; call centre staff are rude and the system is inefficient, and; it could result in more social problems.

However, a small number of respondents felt that the proposals would improve customer services and that they might be more efficient as a result. One respondent noted that there may be difficulties in the short term, but once all the necessary systems are established it would improve customer services.

Overcoming difficulties

The most common suggestion of how to overcome the difficulties outlined above was to keep the current Service Points open.

Some respondents suggested delegating more work out to Service Points so that staff are kept busy, or offering more customer services from Service Points to increase footfall.

It was also suggested that the current Service Points could be maintained but on reduced hours. Respondents also thought the Council should develop more partnerships for service delivery, for example with the police. Others felt that it was important to maintain the Service Points that offer Registration.

Other comments relating to overcoming difficulties were: provide more PCs in Access Points; provide free of charge telephones in Access Points to call the Service Centre; it will cost more to overcome any difficulties than making the changes would save; the Council should provide a minibus service to take people to their nearest Community Hub, and; the Council should provide what is best for the community, not what is best for the Council.

Q6: If your local Service Point was removed, what other ways might there be to deliver customer services locally?

Many respondents answered this question by requesting that the Council keeps Service Points open. Many respondents felt there was no alternative way to provide services to the current standard. Some stated that this is the Council's problem and so they would not suggest alternatives.

Again respondents took this opportunity to emphasise the importance of face to face service provision. Some respondents noted that the Council should think very carefully before making any closures, and that the Council should be trying to build up smaller communities rather than closing services in them.

Alternative service provision

The most common suggestion of how to provide services was to share a location with other services. Suggested shared locations included the Police Station, Post Office, museums, libraries, sport centres and health centres.

There were mixed views over the use of a mobile service. Some respondents thought this would be a viable alternative but there were concerns about the associated costs. Respondents also suggested home visits would be needed for people unable to travel.

Some respondents felt that the suggestion that services can be provided online should mean that work is being reallocated to workers in Service Points, rather than asking the public to go online. However, others felt it was suitable to provide more customer services online.

Respondents in some areas suggested that their Service Point should be the Community Hub for the area. Others suggested keeping Service Points open part-time rather than closing them altogether.

Some respondents thought there could be local surgeries in a suitable location, such as a community hall. These surgeries could be held twice weekly, weekly or monthly.

Other suggestions of how to provide customer services were through free phones in libraries or Access Points, letters, local meetings and through the local press, as well as asking the voluntary sector to take over running Service Points or free transport to Community Hubs.

Respondents also suggested ways to save money so that Service Points don't have to close: cut wages of Council staff, remove the Chief Executive, close offices in Inverness, Wick, Dingwall and Golspie, and increase Council tax.

Additional comments

Respondents also left some additional comments.

There were concerns that too much money and too many services are being centralised. Some respondents think that the Council needs to think about the bigger picture and work out ways to encourage people to move to these communities rather than closing services.

Some respondents also thought that saving money should not always be the only reason to consider whether or not to keep services open and the value of Service Points cannot be measured in monetary terms.

Other concerns that respondents had: what will happen to the current Service Point staff; I will need to use the Service Point when I am older; everyone pays the same Council tax so should have the same services; our community does not deserve to be treated like this, and; the savings seem small for the impact they will have.

Respondents also made comments about the consultation document and process. They wanted more information about costs and savings, and some respondents were concerned that incorrect figures had been used throughout the document.

Respondents also highlighted that although the graph in the consultation document shows a decrease in face to face interactions, this happened during a time when opening hours were decreasing and when Service Points became cashless.

Respondents felt therefore that these figures were misleading and did not truly represent the need for Service Points.

Some respondents wanted to know the usage figures for their Service Point as they did not accept that usage was low enough for it to be closed.

Others wanted to know more about how the proposals would impact on staff and how librarians would be trained to work in the Access Point.

In terms of the consultation as a whole, a small number of respondents felt that there should have been public meetings about the proposals and were concerned about how the focus groups were conducted. One respondent also noted that they found the questions in the consultation too vague and open.

Section 2 – Community Group Responses

34 separate community groups responded to the consultation. A full list of these can be found at appendix 1. Of the 34, 26 were Community Councils. The remaining 7 included one from a Citizens Advice Bureau, 2 were from Access Panels and 1 a Development Trust.

Each community group was asked which Service Point they were responding about. The table below outlines the responses received. Some groups responded about a number of offices within their local area, some also responded about offices not directly impacted by the proposals e.g. Kyle of Lochalsh and Inverness.

Service Point	No. of Responses	Service Point	No. Of Responses
Broadford	4	Kyle of Lochalsh	1
Bonar Bridge	3	Brora	1
Acharacle	3	Lochaber – Acharacle, Mallaig, Kinlochleven	1
Gairloch	2	Muir of Ord	1
Kingussie	2	Dornoch	1
Aviemore, Kingussie and Grantown	2	Bettyhill, Durness and Lochinver	1
Grantown	2	Inverness	1
Hilton	2	Lochcarron	1
Fort Augustus	2	Aviemore and Grantown	1
Helmsdale	2	Bettyhill	1
Invergordon	1	Fortrose	1

There were no responses received from groups in relation to the offices at Lairg and Ardersier.

The responses to each of the six questions from community groups are outlined below. Groups were also very specific about the particular community and service point they were responding about. Where appropriate this is presented below but it is provided in more detail in section 3 of the report which considers the responses received split by individual office.

Question 1: What do you think about the 6 principles listed in Section 2?

Groups responding to the consultation were in general supportive of the majority of the principals, although many qualified their agreement, particularly in relation to the impact this could have on individuals and groups. These points are discussed in more detail below under each of the principles.

One group noted that whilst they agreed with the principles, there was a need to ensure they were adhered to and concern expressed that the same solution had been proposed for 17 of the communities which seemed contrary to principle 1.

Some general concerns were noted regarding the principles, particularly that there was no specific commitment that identified and protected the needs of vulnerable people.

Concern was also expressed that there was nothing in the principles about the intention to save money which was presumably the purpose of the exercise.

It was noted that there was no commitment to safeguarding the jobs of the staff affected.

Below, the support and concerns surrounding each principle are outlined.

Principle 1: One solution will not suit all communities and we need to look at each community to understand how Service Points are used and opportunities for local service delivery

There was general agreement from groups about the first principle and the need to consider each individual community separately. It was noted that the demographic profile of each community was different, along with the transport links and geography. Some groups noted that they had a growing population e.g. Fortrose and the wider Black Isle, whilst for others it was an aging population who would specifically require the service, e.g. Bonar Bridge.

Groups also reported the importance of considering the wider community each Service Point was serving as many, for example Kingussie and Grantown, are serving a number of communities.

Principle 2: It is about providing services not keeping buildings where appropriate, not assuming that the current Service Points are in the right location

There was general agreement from groups with this principle but with the caveat that services were still accessible. It was noted that location was still important and that there was a need to engage locally to see what makes most sense.

For some specific locations it was queried whether the proposed change would actually save money. In the cases of Bonar Bridge and Bettyhill, where the current locations have multiple uses, it was noted that there was a need to consider the wider impact of any change. Dornoch Community Council reported the importance of Council rental on the building currently used and the wider economic impact on the community if the Council were to withdraw.

One respondent felt the principle was misleading, with the negatives outweighing the positive. It was queried whether the Council were more intent on not keeping buildings in present locations than providing services.

Principle 3: Need to offer a face to face point of contact for those who do not want to or cannot use technology, or for more complex enquiries

Almost all groups responding to this question noted the importance of face to face contact and many underlined the essential natural of this principle. It was suggested by one group that this should be the guiding principle and should be placed first.

It was regarded as particularly important for elderly residents and others who struggle to use both online technology but also the telephone. Some groups noted that given the aging nature of the Highland population, the need for face to face provision was likely to increase.

Other points noted were that face to face provision is a strength of the current Service Point system and that it can be more efficient to deal with enquiries face to face. It was suggested that more can be picked up from body language, especially for sensitive issues.

It was noted that in some communities, for example Bettyhill, this is the only face to face provision remaining locally.

Principle 4: Consider potential for moving work out to support staff working from home or local locations

Groups were divided on this principle. Some supported the principle noting that moving work out was a positive and a way of retaining jobs locally. It was also suggested that doing this would be a way of retaining Service Points locally and could be a viable option in the remotest communities.

However, some groups disagreed with this proposal, outlining that it would be impossible to provide services from someone's home. Some groups reported that whilst they disagreed with staff working from home, other local locations would be agreeable. One group reported that whilst they agreed with the principle, they suggested centralisation was proposed and not moving work out to staff in communities.

Principle 5: Adopting an appointment based Registration Service to enable a mobile service to replace a dedicated Registrar in certain locations

Groups were again divided on this principle. Overall groups expressed misgivings regarding the proposal with particular concern about the need for people to wait for appointments at a time of personal distress and that appointments may be delayed due to weather. It was also queried whether this proposal would in fact save money given the travel costs involved and also, if providing home visits, the need for 2 staff to attend each visit.

A small number of groups were supportive of the approach noting that it could assist people living in rural areas and older people but the importance of the venue was underlined.

Principle 6: Proposals for dealing with complex enquiries and confidential issues in an environment where there is not a dedicated Service Point e.g. library, thinking about use of technology to link to officers in other locations

On the whole, respondents were unsupportive of this proposal. Concerns were expressed about the use of technology for dealing with complex issues, with groups noting that the individuals most likely to have complex issues would be the ones who cannot use technology. Groups also expressed concern at the poor broadband coverage in some of the locations, e.g. Bonar Bridge, and the efficacy of basing a service on this. One group also suggested that if there are staff in an Access Point, these staff should have access to the necessary technologies to assist users fully.

Some Sutherland groups noted the lack of confidential space available outside Service Point offices and queried where confidential discussions could be held in the future. The importance of being able to deal with confidential issues in rural communities was noted.

Q2: What do you like/dislike about the proposals for your local area?

In the main, respondents noted that they disliked the proposals for their local area. Various reasons were given for this but in the main respondents focused upon the impact the change would have on individuals and the wider community.

Difficulties of travel – concerns were expressed by a number of groups at the impact the increased journey times would have on individuals. It was noted that the journey times for people to access the service are already considerable as Service Points are generally serving a much wider community than the one in which they are based. The lack of public transport was highlighted along with the fact that it will take people much longer to access a service than the travel times quoted. Concerns regarding travel were noted as a particular issue in Grantown and Kingussie, Broadford, Acharacle, Dornoch, Fort Augustus and Gairloch.

Current arrangements more efficient – some groups noted that they felt the current arrangements in place were more efficient that the proposals outlined. This was particularly the case where the Service Point is already located in the library or community centre. Respondents reported that they could not see where the savings could be made as there would be no savings in building costs but also that staff savings seemed to be minimal where staff are currently shared e.g. Bonar Bridge. There was a feeling expressed that the alternative would be more expensive as staff would be required to travel to deliver a service. This was noted as a particular issue in Bettyhill, Durness, Lochinver, Bonar, Broadford and Gairloch.

Centralisation of services – groups expressed their dislike that the proposals appear to be detrimental to rural communities. It was reported that attempts should be made to retain jobs locally and opportunities to transfer work out should be considered. This was seen by some as the latest in the erosion of services for residents and increasing the distance between the Council and its communities. Groups noted this as a particular issue in Grantown, Broadford, Brora, Kingussie, Gairloch and Fort Augustus.

Needs of the Community – concerns were expressed at the impact the proposals would have on the aging population in many communities who do or will need a service but are less able to utilise technology. It was noted that just because many no longer need a face to face service is not a good justification for removing it from those who do. It was reported that as a result of the proposals, some individuals will not go for support resulting in issues going unaddressed. As one group expressed it

'equality of opportunity' is vital, and that the vulnerable and poor would be disadvantaged the most.

Proposed location - a small number of respondents suggested that the proposed location for the access point was not suitable. In Gairloch it was reported that the library contained within the school was not an appropriate location for an access point and that HMIe were already unhappy about the library being located there. In Grantown, groups suggested that the library was too small, had poor disability access and was not able to provide a confidential location. In terms of Inverness, it was suggested that the lack of parking in order to access the facility in Church Street meant that it would be difficult for some people to access this as an alternative to Hilton.

Registration service – a small number of concerns were raised under this question in relation to the proposal to move to an appointment based system and the impact this could have on an individual at a time of stress.

Some respondents used this question as an opportunity to note that although they believed it was important to retain a service, there perhaps were other ways to provide this. Suggestions included a reduction in existing hours or a mobile instead of a fixed service. Invergordon Community Council noted that it would be important to provide arrangements to take account of emergency situations and booking a private meeting room at short notice. The organisation felt this would be vital for some individuals.

A small number of groups noted that they felt the proposals were acceptable. This was in relation to the proposals at Acharacle, Hilton and Kyle.

Q3: How would the proposal for your area impact upon your community?

Overall, there was concern expressed at the potential impact the proposals would have on specific individuals but also the wider community. This was not specific to any particular Service Point area.

Impact on the vulnerable – the greatest level of concern noted was the impact the proposals were likely to have upon the most vulnerable – the elderly, those on low incomes, disabled, people with learning disabilities, carers and people in isolated communities with no transport. It was reported that many individuals already struggle with online communication and this is likely to disproportionately affect them

and make it difficult for them to access a service. One group noted that this was in direct opposition to principle 3.

It was suggested that this could disenfranchise vulnerable groups because they will choose not to access a service when they should or need to. It was reported that this could put their health and wellbeing at risk.

Transport – a related concern highlighted was the impact the limited or lack of transport in some communities would have on individuals being able to access an alternative office. It was reported that even where transport is available, it will not necessarily be at the times appointments are offered and the costs of this will be incurred by the individual. It was suggested that this was most likely to impact upon the elderly who tend to rely more on public transport. One group suggested that there would be a need to review public transport in the areas affected.

Rural communities and the Council - concerns were expressed that these proposals would result in people in rural areas become even more distant and isolated from the Council. It was suggested that this would be perceived as a further loss of service within communities and as increasing centralisation. One group expressed this as 'divorcing Highland Council from their communities'. Concerns were noted that that this would be further disadvantaging fragile areas by reducing services and employment where there should be a focus on sustaining communities.

Employment/economic impact – some groups expressed concerns about the loss of employment within communities where job opportunities are already limited. It was felt the impact of this would be greater within these communities than in other areas of Highland. It was suggested that in some communities the wider economic impact should be considered; for example in Bettyhill the removal of the Service Point would be detrimental to the community and potentially impact on local jobs and other services currently renting space via Naver Teleservice Centre and in Dornoch there was concern at the loss of the tourist information centre should the Service Point close.

One group in Helsmdale also noted that the call centre is inconvenient and difficult to manage.

One group noted that they felt the change would make little difference as the service they currently received had already been reduced. Another group also noted that whilst change would be difficult for their client group, it would be achievable if managed and supported via support workers.

Q4: How will it change the way your community interact with the Council?

Strong views were expressed by groups regarding how the proposals would change the way the community interacts with the Council.

Disengagement – there was a strong feeling that there would be disengagement from the Council, with those who struggle with technology or telephone calls finding it more difficult to engage with the Council. It was suggested the greatest impact would be on the most vulnerable, and the likely effect being a move away from communicating with the Council. It was suggested that some will be able to change how they interact with the Council but many will be disadvantaged and frustrated.

Isolation – it was suggested that Service Points are currently the main link between communities and the Council, particularly within rural areas. Some groups reported that the Council was already seen as remote and these proposals would be likely to exacerbate this and reduce interaction between the Council and the communities it serves.

Resentment – a small number of groups reported that the proposals were likely to increase frustration and resentment with the Council and the feeling is that the focus is more on saving money that on supporting people.

Support needed – some groups noted that there would be a need to provide assistance for individuals to ensure that the way people interact with the Council is not impacted. It was also suggested that whilst some people will be able to change, others will need to find someone to deal with things on their behalf. This support could come from family members or could be organisational support.

Q5: Do you think it will improve customer services or cause difficulties to any people or groups of people, and if so how could these be overcome?

Almost all respondents reported that the proposed changes would cause difficulties to particular groups within the community. Groups were agreed that the main difficulties would be for elderly and vulnerable groups; particularly those on low incomes and with disabilities, who will in the future struggle to access a service in the same way as the currently do.

Concerns were expressed at the longer travel distances and the limited or lack of transport available, alongside the cost implications of this. The challenges of using technology were noted, not just online facilities but also the use of the telephone which elderly people with hearing loss can at times struggle with. There were

concerns expressed that the challenges of accessing a face to face service will result in some people no longer being able to access a service and therefore not receiving the support they need.

It was noted by some that there could be difficulties created for people currently working, who will not be able to make the longer journeys to access a service during the working day.

Concerns were also expressed at the negative impact upon the recently bereaved and the necessity to either travel to register a death or the wait involved for an appointment.

One group also suggested that the proposals could cause difficulties for the Council as it would take direct control of customer services out of the hands of the Council.

The Helmsdale Community Centre felt that a mobile Registrar would be a marked improvement for their area.

How to overcome any difficulties

There was a view from some groups that the way in which to overcome the difficulties outlined was to maintain the service as it currently is. It was reported that nothing could replace a face to face service with a trained and professional member of staff. A further view expressed was that any Service Point with a registrar should be left as this was a service better done face to face. A related suggestion was that existing offices should be made more viable by reallocating work from other busier offices and other parts of the Council.

Some respondents did suggest alternative ways of providing the service, in the main these focused on ways to avoid the need for customers in rural communities to travel. It was suggested that village halls could be used as a point of contact or that home visits were provided instead. A further suggestion included a full mobile service but the group's view was that this was likely to be more expensive than the current provision.

A small number of respondents reported that having an appointment based system could help overcome difficulties, especially knowing where and when to be able to access specialist services.

It was reported that there would be a need to provide support to Service Point users as a way of overcoming difficulties with the new approach. This was specifically in relation to using technology but also providing appropriate training and support to library staff to be able to effectively support clients.

A small number of groups reported that the proposals would either have no direct impact or that it was difficult to determine the impact at the current time.

Q6: If your local Service Point was removed, what other ways might there be to deliver customer services locally?

There was a strong feeling from a number of groups that the current method of service provision is the most effective and efficient. It was reported that it was difficult to see where else savings could be made given that the office is already located either within the library, as in the case of Bonar Bridge or within an alternative facility such as the Naver Centre in Bettyhill.

Where co-location wasn't already in place, it was suggested that this could be an option going forward, along with revising opening hours. In the case of Broadford, it was suggested that perhaps there were options to provide the Service Point within the school or from the new hospital hub therefore reducing overheads. One respondent suggested that with the Kingussie Court House development, existing staff could be utilised with other Council work but be available for queries as and when required. This would help to avoid people having to travel.

An alternative to the current proposals suggested was to decentralise work from other parts of the Council to the Service Point in order to maintain the service and jobs in communities.

It was suggested that where there was a centre of population, such as in Grantown, a full Service Point facility is required.

One view expressed was that people in rural areas also require face to face services no less than any in the 12 'big towns'. It was suggested that just because there are fewer people doesn't make it any less important for these communities.

Other suggestions for service delivery included mobile and home visiting services. Some concerns were expressed about the cost of both these options but the importance of maintaining a face to face service was the main emphasis. Some concerns were expressed about the ability of people without transport and those not able to travel to access appointment based systems.

General Comments from Community Groups

In addition to the responses to the questions outlined above, groups also provided a number of general points. These are detailed below.

A point noted by some of the groups responding was that the general principle on which the proposals are based is wrong. It was noted that the conclusion that just because there are fewer people using the offices for face to face that these offices should be closed is flawed as those still using them still require the service.

A further point made was that the conclusion cannot be drawn that the additional people using telephone and email are the ones who previously visited the office in person.   It was suggested that people may have stopped using the office for a number of reasons including shorter opening hours. It was further noted that satisfaction levels with telephone and email were shown to be declining from the Council's 2014 Performance survey, whilst face to face is still the preferred method of contact.

A few groups suggested that it was impossible for them to accurately gauge how the Service Point has been operating as no detailed information was provided regarding the number of customers and also that no detailed breakdown of costs was available. It was suggested that without these it was impossible to tell whether the proposals are reasonable or not.

Overall concerns were expressed by groups across the area about the potential economic impact of the changes on small and fragile communities. It was suggested that rural communities were always the ones to suffer most in terms of cuts. It was suggested that of the savings proposed, the additional investment was likely to take place in Inverness and Alness at the expense of jobs in rural communities.

Section 3 - Responses by Service Point

Individual respondents and Community Groups were asked which Service Point they were completing the survey about. The key points made about each Service Point location are outlined below.

Mid and Easter Ross

Muir of Ord

There were 2 individual responses about Muir of Ord and respondents focussed on the negative effect that removing face to face services would have on the community. One respondent suggested that a twice weekly surgery could be another way of providing face to face services locally.

Ferintosh Community Council responded to the consultation about Muir of Ord Service Point, highlighting the valuable service it provides to those who may struggle to use alternatives. It was suggested by the group that perhaps a reduction in the number of days – from 5 to 2 or 3 – could assist in maintaining a service but reducing costs.

Communication was also received during the consultation from the Muir of Ord Hall and Facilities Company who have recently agreed to take over the old school building in Muir of Ord to create a community facility. The organisation has requested that the Council considers placing the Access Point in the planned community hub which will be in the Muir of Ord village square. One of the key elements of the new hub is intended to be an information point.

Fortrose

There were 2 individual responses from Fortrose. There were concerns about a lack of clarity over what the Access Point would offer. If face to face services were removed then respondents felt that the elderly population would be affected as they are less likely to be able to use online or telephone services.

Fortrose and Rosemarkie Community Council responded expressing concern at the proposals given that the current office serves the whole Black Isle area. It was suggested that the growing population and particularly the growing elderly population, would continue to require a service. There was recognition that the need for a full-time office was no longer there but concern at the complete loss of the facility.

Invergordon

There were 14 individual responses to the consultation from Invergordon.

Q1: Respondents from Invergordon were most concerned with maintaining face to face service provision, especially for people who cannot use technology. Respondents were also concerned about the mobile service, feeling that there were unanswered questions and that it would not work in practice. There were also comments about the current Service Point: that it is in the wrong location on the edge of town and there is no privacy.

Q2: Respondents disliked another service being removed from Invergordon: it was suggested Invergordon was being downgraded and was becoming a ghost town. Respondents also voiced dissatisfaction that the Community Hub was to be based in Alness, and questioned why the Hub couldn't be based in Invergordon instead. Some highlighted that not everyone will be able to travel to Alness even though it is relatively nearby.

Q3: Respondents stated that it would impact on their ability to make rent and Council tax payments as they currently do this weekly at the Service Point. Others noted that it would be difficult for some people to travel to Alness, and not everyone can use technology instead. Again it was highlighted that a lot of services have left Invergordon over recent years.

Q4: Respondents felt the main impact would be the removal of local face to face services. Some respondents noted that they pay their Council tax, and that money should be saved in other areas, not by cutting services.

Q5: Respondents thought that the proposal would cause difficulties, and that the only way to overcome these difficulties is to keep the Service Point open.

Q6: Some respondents suggested the Service Point could be run from a local shop, Post Office or bank, or reduce its opening hours. Again, respondents highlighted that there are few services left in Invergordon. Some noted that they thought their Service Point was safe as it was already co-located in the library.

Kilmuir and Logie Easter Community Council noted the lack of clarity around what provision would be put in place to support any emergency situation within Invergordon. It was noted that at times there would be a need to ensure an immediate response was provided and provision therefore needs to be in place to support this. The group noted that whilst more use of technology was welcomed, it should not be at the expense of those in the community who do not have access.

Inverness Area

Fort Augustus

There was one individual response from Fort Augustus. This respondent was concerned that closing the Service Point would impact on the community as a whole, as it would affect community spirit. They suggested having a new community hub building in the centre of Fort Augustus offering the library, Service Point, meeting rooms and conference space.

2 community groups responded to the consultation; Fort Augustus and Glenmoriston Community Council and Fort Augustus and Glengarry Church of Scotland. It was noted that the current office covers a wider geographical area than just Fort Augustus and that the distances involved to travel to an alternative office would be considerable, especially given the limited public transport available. There was support noted for transferring work out to the Service Point and that this would be a more efficient use of the Service Point and cost effective for the Council.

Concerns were expressed about what would happen to the memorial hall should the Service Point move elsewhere and that this was of historical significance. The response from the Church of Scotland Minister queried whether a mobile service could be more cost effective. The Community Council noted the importance of the Council continuing to explore other options.

A meeting set up locally to explore alternative options for providing customer services in Fort Augustus was held in October 2014 with Council officers, community representatives and Police Scotland. This meeting highlighted the important historical significance of the building and the regular use of the facilities by community groups. There was support for work being allocated to the Service Point and a preference for a full time solution (Mon – Fri 9-5pm) for the office to be found. Alternative delivery options were discussed with potential opportunities highlighted with Police Scotland and perhaps Job Centre Plus. It was agreed these would be explored. Other alternatives were deemed not suitable for a range of reasons.

Hilton

There was one individual response from Hilton. This respondent was concerned that the Community Hub would be too busy to deal with everyone, and that it will be difficult to elderly people to get into the town centre.

3 community groups responded to the consultation in relation to the Hilton office. One group expressed concerns regarding the lack of parking in the centre of Inverness and that this in turn could result in the isolation of customers due to a lack of service being provided. A further group, which supports individuals with brain injuries, noted how busy the Inverness office is and that it is likely to get busier with

this proposal. Concerns were noted for their client group who may struggle if all face to face appointments need to be booked in advance but a feeling that although change is difficult, if support is provided then it would be achievable. One further group felt that the proposals were agreeable and would not make a significant difference.

Ardersier

There were no responses received either from individuals or community groups about Ardersier Service Point.

Inverness

There was one individual response received regarding the Inverness Service Point. This respondent was concerned that having the Community Hub in Church Street would encourage homeless people to hang about outside the office and felt that this would make Church Street an unsafe area. They stated that this would discourage people who need to use the Community Hub from visiting it.

Lochaber

Acharacle

3 Community Councils responded to the consultation with regards Acharacle Service Point. One expressed concern regarding the proposal, noting the already limited service and the travel times involved to access the service. The views on the potential impact of the proposal were mixed with one group reporting that it would make little difference given the reductions already experienced, whilst another that it was difficult to determine at this stage. One Community Council felt that, although difficult for people in Acharacle, it could be a positive for Strontian. This view was expressed with the belief that a Service Point would be located in the library in Strontian.

Lochaber Access Panel responded about all Service Points within the Lochaber area. It was suggested that an Access Point be considered either at Kilchoan or Acharacle, otherwise disabled members of the communities of Ardnamurchan, Morven and Knoydart will become isolated and the journey time to the alternative service in Fort William is 1.5 hours. It was suggested that perhaps an access point at Acharacle could be housed within the Community Company's base or the Acharacle Centre.

Mallaig

There were no responses received from individuals about Mallaig Service Point.

Lochaber Access Panel responded about all Service Points within the Lochaber area. It was suggested that an Access Point be considered either at Kilchoan or Acharacle, otherwise disabled members of the communities of Ardnamurchan, Morven and Knoydart will become isolated and the journey time to the alternative service in Fort William is 1.5 hours. It was suggested that perhaps an access point at Acharacle could be housed within the Community Company's base or the Acharacle Centre.

Kinlochleven

There were no responses received either from individuals or community groups about Kinlochleven Service Point.

Lochaber Access Panel responded about all Service Points within the Lochaber area. It was suggested that an Access Point be considered either at Kilchoan or Acharacle, otherwise disabled members of the communities of Ardnamurchan, Morven and Knoydart will become isolated and the journey time to the alternative service in Fort William is 1.5 hours. It was suggested that perhaps an access point at Acharacle could be housed within the Community Company's base or the Acharacle Centre.

Badenoch and Strathspey

Grantown

There were 5 individual responses received from Grantown. Generally there was support for the principles however there were concerns about how the proposal may affect older residents. Respondents felt that the Grantown library is not suitable as it is too small and does not have a private space.

It was highlighted that the community would feel abandoned and like the Council does not care about it if the Service Point is removed. Respondents felt that the Service Point is needed particularly for older people and people with disabilities. They felt that services would not be improved as many people cannot travel or use online services.

Respondents suggested that the Service Point needs to stay open. However one respondent felt that it could be based in the library but only if the same services were offered.

3 Community Councils responded specifically about Grantown Service Point. The main concerns noted were regarding the length of journey people will now be required to make in order to access a service and also the increasing isolation people are likely to feel when the service is no longer available. The importance of face to face was underlined, especially for those unable to utilise technology. It was suggested that people should not have to travel far to register a death and whilst a mobile registrar would work for scattered rural communities, it would not be appropriate here.

One Community Council suggested that the opportunity to share services with other organisations should be explored especially given that there is now an empty police station within the community. A further view expressed was that the library was not appropriate for an Access Point given issues around disability access and the lack of a confidential space.

2 community groups, including the <u>Badenoch and Strathspey Access Panel</u>, responded about both Service Points in Badenoch and Strathspey. Concerns were noted at the travel distances to both locations, especially for those who cannot drive and also the emphasis being placed on electronic communication in the future. It was felt this would isolate the elderly, disabled and people with learning disabilities.

It was suggested that given the refurbishment of Kingussie Court House, there was an opportunity to create a community hub there given that all Council services are going to be on site. A further suggestion was to use village halls as a point of contact in local communities to reduce the need for people to travel.

Kingussie

There were 23 responses from Kingussie.

Q1: Respondents in Kingussie felt it was important to retain face to face services, particularly for the older people in the area. Respondents suggested that the new Kingussie Court House should be used as a Service Point. Some respondents also noted the poor public transport in the area, which would make it difficult for many to travel to Aviemore.

Q2: Respondents disliked the centralisation of services in Aviemore, as this seems to be happening with many services. Some highlighted that people already have to travel in to Kingussie from surrounding villages and so moving the Service Point to Aviemore would increase the journey even further for these people.

Respondents again highlighted the renovation of the Court House- some felt it did not make sense to spend money renovating this building and then not offer any customer services.

Q3: Respondents in Kingussie were particularly concerned about the impact on elderly people in the community. They felt that older people are less likely to be able to use technology or be able to travel to Aviemore.

Q4: Generally respondents felt that it would become more difficult to interact with the Council, and the Council will become more distant to people living in and around Kingussie.

Q5: Respondents felt the proposals would cause difficulties, particularly to those who are most likely to need the services such as the elderly and vulnerable. In terms of how this can be addressed some respondents suggested keeping the Service Point open as it is; other suggested a reduction in opening hours; and others suggested if there were any changes then the Council should promote these changes publicly so that everyone knows how to make contact.

Q6: In the main, respondents in Kingussie felt the only option was to retain the current Service Point then move this service to the Court House when it is ready. However, some respondents offered some alternatives: an appointment system; share premises with the Post Office, library, police station or sports centre, or; home visits. Some respondents suggested the Council should look to make savings in other areas.

2 Community Councils responded specifically about the Kingussie Service Point. As with Grantown, it was noted that the communities served by the Kingussie office are wide spread and the travel distances involved for people to access a service in the future will be even greater. It was suggested that there was a lack of public transport and that the cost of the increased travel would need to be met by already vulnerable individuals. It was also highlighted that people requiring to travel, may find that the times appointments are available do not coincide with the bus times.

There was a general concern highlighted at the potential economic impact the proposals may have on the village of Kingussie because in the future people may travel direct to Aviemore and do their shopping there. Given that Council staff will be based at the Court house in the future, it was queried whether or not there was a way to retain the support function from the staff who will remain based in that office.

2 community groups, including the Badenoch and Strathspey Access Panel, responded about both Service Points in Badenoch and Strathspey. Concerns were noted at the travel distances to both locations, especially for those who cannot drive and also the emphasis being placed on electronic communication in the future. It was felt this would isolate the elderly, disabled and people with learning disabilities.

It was suggested that given the refurbishment of Kingussie Court House, there was an opportunity to create a community hub there given that all Council services are going to be on site. A further suggestion was to use village halls as a point of contact in local communities to reduce the need for people to travel.

Skye and Wester Ross

Broadford

There were 4 individual responses from Broadford. Opinion was split over the principles however respondents agreed that face to face services are essential, particularly for older people who may not have anyone else to speak to. Respondents in Broadford were concerned that such a small saving would be made when there will be a big impact on the community. The proposals could deter people from moving to Skye as it will be difficult to access Council services, particularly for people with mobility problems.

A joint response was received to the consultation from 5 of the Community Councils in south Skye. 3 of these Community Councils also chose to submit individual responses. As within other areas, concerns were noted about the large rural area served by the Service Point and the impact the proposals were likely to have on individuals living in these communities. The lack of public transport was highlighted, along with poor internet connectivity. It was suggested that the travel times to access a service would be far in excess of the 30 minutes quoted within the consultation document

There was support noted for moving work out to the Service Point and the importance of this in retaining local jobs. One group reported that it was unfair to lose local jobs in order to create new ones in Alness and Inverness.

It was queried whether there would be savings made from the proposals given that there is still a three year lease on the current premises. It was suggested that in the future there could be opportunities to look at amalgamating the service with other Council provision such as the school or within the new hospital complex.

One Community Council felt the issues originated from the lack of recognition of the special characteristics of remote and rural areas. It was suggested that all Service Points should be retained, the use of the offices maximised and opening hours revised.

Lochcarron

There were 11 individual responses from Lochcarron. There was some concern that the proposal for Lochcarron had not been thought through properly.

Q1: Generally there was support for the principles, although some respondents were not supportive of a Principle 5.

Q2: The main concern of respondents in Lochcarron was the distance to the nearest Community Hub in Kyle. This route is not well served by public transport and can be dangerous in winter. Some respondents also noted that people travel from surrounding villages to use the Lochcarron Service Point and so they will have even further to travel to reach Kyle.

Q3: Respondents felt the proposals would have a detrimental impact on people in Lochcarron. Respondents particularly noted the excellent service they receive from Service Point staff and how this would be missed if it was removed.

Q4: Respondents suggested that there would be less interaction with the Council due to the removal of face to face services: respondents were unhappy at having to rely on the call centre. Respondents also noted that there would be more ill-feeling towards the Council if the proposals were to go ahead.

Q5: Respondents in Lochcarron felt that the proposal would affect older people, and people with no access to computers. They suggested the only way to overcome this was to keep the SP open.

Q6: Mainly respondents felt there was no other way to deliver services. However some respondents did note other ways to provide services: involve the Howard Doris Centre in some way; Registrar could work from home, or: share a building with the police or GP surgery.

<u>Lochcarron Community Council</u> reported that those within the community who do not have transport or are not able to access services online with be most disadvantaged by the proposal. It was also queried how the librarian was going to cope with the additional work. The group noted how there had already been a reduction of service at the existing office and how that had already had a negative impact locally.

Gairloch

There were 22 individual responses from Gairloch. Some respondents were concerned about how the focus group in Gairloch was conducted and feel there should have been a public meeting instead. One respondent also questioned how Community Hubs were chosen and felt that some Hubs were close together e.g. Kyle and Portree, and Wick and Thurso.

Q1: Respondents from Gairloch emphasised the importance of face to face services particularly for older people. Respondents also highlighted that a mobile service would be difficult in this area due to the widely dispersed population and the difficult road network. They suggested that there could be a delay in registering deaths (this was a concern shared by the local undertaker).

Q2: Respondents in Gairloch were very concerned at the very long distance to travel to Ullapool to reach the Community Hub. They also highlighted the lack of adequate public transport, with only one bus a day to Dingwall and Inverness, and one bus a week to Ullapool. A mobile service also wouldn't work due to the large area that would need to be covered.

Respondents also disliked the proposal to put the Access Point in the local library as this also the school library; it was seen an inconvenient but also inappropriate. It was noted there is restricted access during the school holidays and there is little privacy.

It was also highlighted that there seem to be lots of Community Hubs on the East Coast, and that the distance between them is much smaller than distances on the West.

Q3: Respondents were particularly concerned about the loss of their local member of staff. They highlighted that many people in the area like to talk to someone they know, especially for something as distressing as registering a death, but respondents were also concerned about a loss of a job in the area.

Respondents also stated that roads are often blocked in winter which will make travelling to the Community Hub even more difficult.

Q4: Respondents felt that if the proposal went ahead it would feel as though the Council is disengaged from the community and like it is not interested in Gairloch and the surrounding communities. Some respondents noted the proposals made them want to stop paying their Council tax.

Q5: Respondents felt the proposals would cause difficulties, particularly for people who cannot use technology. Older people and vulnerable groups will be affected the most: respondents suggested that people often use the Service Point when they are vulnerable e.g. times of bereavement. Respondents in Gairloch felt the only way to deal with these problems was to leave the Service Points as they are.

Q6: Some respondents felt that there were no alternatives for service provision in Gairloch. However, others suggested sharing a building with the new museum, operating with reduced hours or increasing Council tax.

Gairloch and Wester Loch Ewe Community Councils responded to the consultation. It was reported that there had already been a reduction in service from the last customer services review and that the cost savings therefore proposed were likely to be minimal, given that the office is located in the police station. Concerns were noted about the impact upon individuals and the long distances that people would be required to travel in order to access an alternative service. It was suggested this would hit the most vulnerable and people would become more isolated from the Council.

The groups noted that the Gairloch library would not be a suitable place to house an access point given the lack of confidential space and also that the library's current location had been highlighted as a concern by HMIe.

It was suggested that there were no other practical or viable options available locally.

An additional response was received from GALE (Gairloch and Loch Ewe Action Forum) suggesting the use of the GALE Centre in Gairloch as a possible Access Point. The premises is community owned hub containing office accommodation, classrooms for West Highland College, a tourist information centre, café, exhibition centre and community shop. The Centre is open 6 days per week and is fully staffed.

Kyle of Lochalsh

There were 7 individual responses from Kyle of Lochalsh. Respondents liked that Kyle will have a Community Hub and feel this is a good, central location for a Hub. They do not think there will be any impact on service delivery as face to face services will be maintained.

However, respondents noted how a closure would affect their community. They thought it would negatively impact on elderly and disabled residents, and there would be no other way to deliver services, apart from the full Service Point.

Respondents also highlighted that rural areas need to be considered differently, as technology is not as reliable especially in bad weather.

Kyle Community Council reported that they were pleased the decision had been taken to retain the Kyle office. Should the office be retained, there would be no negative impact upon the community.

North, West and Central Sutherland

Lochinver

There were 4 individual responses from Lochinver and opinion was divided over the 6 principles. Respondents felt that Ullapool is too far away to expect people in Lochinver to travel to. They would like to see the Service Point remain in Lochinver to provide friendly, face to face services but do acknowledge that the Service Point could be improved. Respondents felt that there were no alternatives for service delivery.

North and West Sutherland CAB responded regarding the Service Points at Bettyhill, Durness and Lochinver. It was suggested that the savings from closing the office in

Bettyhill were likely to be minimal, given that the Library and Service Point are currently staffed by the same person. It was also queried whether there would be savings from the Durness and Lochinver offices, depending on what was replacing them but that home visits were likely to prove more expensive.

The CAB also noted that people were likely to become more disengaged from the Council and that, given the proposals involve closing all North and West Sutherland offices, it was queried how a face to face service was to be maintained.

Durness

There was one individual response from Durness. This respondent understood the need to review Service Points but did not feel it was appropriate to close Durness as there are very poor transport links to the Community Hub. They suggested a weekly surgery in the local area for people that need to speak with someone face to face.

North and West Sutherland CAB responded regarding the Service Points at Bettyhill, Durness and Lochinver. It was suggested that the savings from closing the office in Bettyhill were likely to be minimal, given that the Library and Service Point are currently staffed by the same person. It was also queried whether there would be savings from the Durness and Lochinver offices, depending on what was replacing them but that home visits were likely to prove more expensive.

The CAB also noted that people were likely to become more disengaged from the office and that, given the proposals involve closing all North and West Sutherland offices, it was queried how a face to face service was to be maintained.

Bettyhill

There was one individual response from Bettyhill. This respondent was concerned about the distance people in and around Bettyhill would need to travel to the Community Hub, and the unreliable broadband and telephone connections in the area. The respondent suggested there would be a small saving for such a big impact on the community.

The Naver Teleservice Centre, where the Service Point is currently based, also responded to the consultation. The response questioned what savings would be made from the proposal given the minimal overhead expenses and also that the library and service point are currently co-located and staffed by the same person. Concerns were also noted for the future of the facility, from which other services are run, if the Council was no longer paying rent. Support was noted for reallocating work from other offices in order to retain a local job.

North and West Sutherland CAB responded regarding the Service Points at Bettyhill, Durness and Lochinver. It was suggested that the savings from closing the office in Bettyhill were likely to be minimal, given that the Library and Service Point are currently staffed by the same person. It was also queried whether there would be savings from the Durness and Lochinver offices, depending on what was replacing them but that home visits were likely to prove more expensive.

The CAB also noted that people were likely to become more disengaged from the office and that, given the proposals involve closing all North and West Sutherland offices, it was queried how a face to face service was to be maintained.

Bonar Bridge

There were 5 individual responses from Bonar Bridge. Respondents agree with many of the principles, and feel that maintaining local face to face services is very important. It can be difficult to travel to Golspie using public transport.

If the proposal went ahead respondents felt that the Council would become more distant and faceless, and communication with the Council would decrease. The proposals would cause difficulties in the community, particularly for people that cannot use technology. Respondents suggested using Bonar Bridge as the Community Hub.

One respondent questioned where the savings will be made, as the library and member of staff will still be there, and another was concerned about centralisation of services. One respondent highlighted that they had found it difficult to submit their comments online and said this is an example of how technology does not always work properly.

Creich and Ardgy and District Community Councils and the Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust responded to the consultation. All queried what savings the proposals would generate and noted the current shared building, the current shared member of staff and the commitment from High Life Highland to retain the opening hours at 17 per week. The groups estimated the savings to therefore be staff savings around £1500, once the additional librarian hours are calculated. It was suggested that the need for staff to travel to deliver services in the future would outweigh any savings made from the current proposals.

The groups expressed concern about the impact the proposals would have both upon individuals and the area as a whole. The growing elderly population was highlighted and it was suggested this is likely to result in a greater need for face to face services in the future. Poor internet connections, the considerable distance from alternative provision and poor public transport links, would make it challenging for the community to access a service in the future.

Concerns were also noted however at the potential impact on the area as a whole. It was suggested that there was a need to reverse the declining population rather than reducing service provision within the area.

Two of the groups outlined concerns about the approach of providing home visits for people who require it; it was suggested that vulnerable people will be targeted by fraudsters who claim to be from the Council.

It was stated that the Council appear to be taking a reduction in the number of people using face to face services as an indication that people no longer want to use this facility. It was suggested that this premise was wrong and instead there should be attempts to find out how to improve services.

A concern was noted that vulnerable Service Point users will not have been able to respond to this consultation.

Lairg

There were 2 individual responses from Lairg and respondents were concerned about the removal of local services and having to travel to Golspie or Tain for the Community Hub.

East Sutherland

Brora

There were 5 responses from Brora. Respondents supported principle one as they agreed that one size does not fit all. However, respondents did not like the proposal for Brora as they feel that the current service provided in the library works well, and that it cannot be replace by a mobile unit or online services.

The proposal would cause difficulties as people would have to travel to Golspie which is not easy for all (particularly older people and people with disabilities). It would also cause difficulties for people who cannot use computers. Respondents felt that the proposal would reduce their interaction with the Council

Brora Community Council highlighted that the Service Point was now the only Highland Council presence in the village. It was felt that the current provision was already a community hub, with other services being provided from here. Concerns were noted at the limited availability of transport to Golspie in order to access services from the Community hub and the impact upon the elderly and vulnerable within the community. It was suggested that such a trip would take around half a day and would not be suitable for anyone who is disabled.

The Community Council reported that the consultation was not accessible for vulnerable people within the community.

Dornoch

There were 82 responses from Dornoch.

Respondents emphasised that Dornoch should be considered a unique town, due to the large number of tourists that visit and the large number of weddings that take place each year. Respondents also highlighted that they have a large elderly population (some stating that Dornoch has the largest proportion of over 60s in Highland).

Respondents also stated how much the town has lost over the years and some felt that the town was being treated unfairly and that the Council was being disrespectful to the county town of Sutherland.

Some respondents were concerned about the figures that have been used to determine that Dornoch should be closed. They felt that the Council has used incorrect figures to calculate costs and savings.

Q1: Respondents in Dornoch were concerned that this seems to be a money saving exercise rather than trying to improve customer services. Respondents emphasised the importance of face to face services, particularly as there is a large elderly population in Dornoch.

Respondents are generally happy with the location of the current Service Point as it is a central, easy to access location. This is particularly important as Dornoch Service Point is also the Tourist Information Point.

Q2: Respondents voiced many of the concerns outlined in the main report. In relation to using the library as an Access Point, some respondents noted that the only private space in the Dornoch library is upstairs which is not accessible for everyone.

In addition, there was a focus on the number of tourists that visit Dornoch each year, and a lot of concern about what facilities would be available to them. Respondents felt that Dornoch is in a unique situation due to the large number of tourists that visit the area and as such, the Service Point should remain open. Its closure could have a detrimental economic impact on the area as a whole, as it could lead to a reduction in the number of visitors but also a reduction in the number of weddings if the local Registrar was removed. Some respondents quoted number of 24,000 visitors each year and over 50 weddings.

Some respondents thought that Dornoch should be a Community Hub in place of Golspie or Tain as it is the county town of Sutherland.

Q3: Respondents felt that the proposal would have detrimental impacts on Dornoch, and these impacts are similar to those outlined in the main report. Respondents in Dornoch were particularly concerned about the impact this would have on elderly residents, as this group is less likely to be able to travel, less likely to have access to technology but the most likely to need face to face services.

Respondents from Dornoch were also concerned about the impact the proposal would have on the area as many services have been removed in recent years. They were concerned that the closure of the Service Point could lead to a reduction in visitors to the area which would have a detrimental economic impact on the area.

Q4: The main concern in Dornoch was the reduction in face to face service delivery. Respondents in Dornoch also stated they would lose respect for the Council if these proposals went ahead, and that the Council would become more distant to the community.

Q5: Respondents felt that the proposals would cause difficulties to people in Dornoch and that this could only be overcome by keeping the Dornoch Service Point open. Again, respondents stated they felt that Dornoch is in a unique situation due to the large number of tourists that visit, the number of weddings and also because of their elderly population.

Q6: Responses from Dornoch mirrored the responses outlined in the main report. Many respondents could not see any alternative to the current Service Point, and suggested expanding the Service Point instead. Some other respondents suggested the library as an alternative location.

The issues raised by <u>Dornoch Community Council</u>, mirror those already highlighted by the individuals from Dornoch responding to the consultation. Significant concerns were noted about the impact the proposals would have on the economy of Dornoch – in terms of the removal of the registration and tourist information centre - but also on the sustainability of the building should the Council withdraw. It was suggested that the Service Centre was inefficient and nothing can replace face to face provision from knowledgeable local staff. It was reported that the Council should not be centralising but decentralising and utilising technology to put work out to the Service Point.

Helmsdale

There were 4 individual responses from Helmsdale. Respondents showed some support for the principles but were unsure how they would work in practice. They suggested that many people in the community cannot use technology and the community needs to maintain this local service.

<u>Helmsdale and District Community Council</u> were opposed to any change to the service and <u>Helmsdale Community Centre</u> felt that the full Service Point needed to be reinstated in the library.

Other Areas

Thurso

There was one response from Thurso, and this respondent stated that they felt very lucky to have a Community Hub and that they thought it would be hard for people in other areas to cope.

Portree

There were 2 responses from Portree and respondents were very positive about the move to improve online services.

Section 4: Ward Member Responses

Discussions were held with Members in individual Ward Business Meetings during November 2014. The following summarises the key points highlighted in these discussions. This is arranged by Service Point.

Mid and Easter Ross

Muir of Ord

Members reported that an Access Point in Muir of Ord library would be an acceptable location as it is near the town centre.

Invergordon

Members felt that the proposal to turn the Service Point in Invergordon into an access point was not acceptable, however they would be interested in whether a flexible approach was available.

It was reported that the Service Point provision was critical to Invergordon as Alness is seen as too far for some vulnerable sections of the community.

Invergordon is an important economic centre in the Highlands, bringing £ms of income and should be recognised in the provision of services

It was noted that Alness Service Point was seen as 'pokey' and not suitable for community hub as it is very difficult to conduct private business in a library setting, even though there is a private room.

It was suggested whether it is possible for service provision to be shared equally between Alness and Invergordon i.e. Alness open AM and Invergordon open PM. It was also questioned whether it was possible to co-locate the Invergordon Service Point with the new primary school in 2 years' time.

Members were supportive of the principle of Registration appointments.

Any new Customer Services review model should have a Freephone 'hotline' to the Service Centre located in the private room, to enable customers to call direct and for free in private.

Fortrose

Members expressed concern about the potential closure of the service point in Fortrose and were keen to understand what an access point solution would look like.

Inverness Area

Fort Augustus

Members noted how geographically isolated Fort Augustus is and how it needs to have its own solution.

Initial work had been done with Cllr Davidson, Council Partners and community representatives to look for shared services solutions for Fort Augustus.

It was questioned whether work currently centralised can be moved to Fort Augustus and what opportunities there are to co-locate with Partners such as Police Scotland.

Hilton

Members acknowledged the need for the Service Point to close in view of the budget savings target and low customer volumes.

However Members noted that Church Street is too far to travel, especially for older and disabled customers. Concerns were also expressed about the longer waiting times in Inverness due to the higher volume of customers.

Inverness Library as an access point was not seen as a viable solution and concerns were expressed about potential High Life Highland (HLH) library closures in the future and the fact that the review is based on a partnership with HLH.

HLH now run Hilton Community Centre and Members queried whether HLH could provide an access point in the community centre rather than Inverness Library.

Ardersier

Members expressed concern about vulnerability of the age group using the Service Point but also positively received the opportunity to explore the benefits of new technologies.

Members queried as to if there was opportunity to work with the post office or other Partners to deliver a service.

Members questioned the future of HLH plans for the area and if the access point was located in the library, would this be protected in future.

Members asked about opportunities for translation services and what services could be offered by phone, with NHS Highland having some innovation in this area.

Lochaber

Acharacle, Mallaig and Kinlochleven

Members enquired whether mobile libraries could be used for any service provision.

It was suggested that discussions are held with HLH to review the salaries of library staff to see if an enhanced service rather than the access point model could be offered to minimise the impact to staff.

Concern was expressed about the opening hours of libraries and whether this would mean a significant reduction in access hours. It was suggested that officers should explore optimum opening hours of libraries in order to match demand for Service Point access.

Concern was noted about registration withdrawal and that this would be an issue for the Small Isles and isolated communities such as Knoydart especially in the winter with ferry timescales.

There may be potential in Acharacle to partner with the Community Company and that this should be explored.

Badenoch and Strathspey

Members wished to be clear that these were proposals for discussion and that no agreements have been made.

All members felt very strongly about the potential reduction in service points in their areas and felt that this was not a proposal that they would support, and wished their strong views on behalf of their communities to be recognised.

Concerns were expressed about the model with HLH should HLH be required to find extra budget savings, and how this would affect future service point/access point provision.

Members expressed strong concern that the proposal does not include a Service Point in Kingussie, especially with the redevelopment of the Court House building which is seen as a flagship project, and needs to have the service point retained.

Concern was also expressed about Grantown and the proposed move to an access point, as local registration provision was seen as very important.

Skye and Wester Ross

Lochcarron, Gairloch, Kyle, Skye

Members were very pleased to see Kyle proposed as a community hub.

Members questioned the level of service that might be available if Lochcarron were to become an Access Point as the library opening hours are limited.

It was noted that the Gairloch Service Point is critical to service delivery in the area, given the geography, especially in winter and with an aging population.

If the Service Point was to move into the library within the school there would be potential issues with access during school opening hours and also the library is open when the school is shut.

Registration, and especially death registration is an issue if Gairloch is removed due to geographical location and distance from other Service Point.

The preference would be for Gairloch to remain as a full Service Point shared with the Police as is currently the case.

It was noted that there are two care homes in Gairloch and one in Lochcarron.

Mobile libraries were discussed but the Members' view was that this service is already too widely spread and not really suitable.

Members queried what work can be re-distributed to rural Service Points.

With regard to Skye and the proposed changes concerning Broadford members felt very strongly that service point provision should remain in Broadford as a central point for the community and that asking customers to travel to Kyle or Portree was too far and unacceptable.

It was also felt by local members that the amount of savings to be delivered from closing the Broadford did not justify the negative impact on the community.

North, West and Central Sutherland

Durness, Bettyhill, Lochinver, Bonar Bridge and Lairg

Members noted that individuals in Bettyhill would not go to Thurso to access an alternative service but to Lairg or Tain.

Members expressed concern at the impact upon registration for Durness/Bettyhill and the impact on this area as a whole as a result of the proposed changes.

Members felt strongly that public transport in the area was poor and that a round trip to a service point on public transport would take the best part of a day, if it was actually possible.

Members were also concerned about service point provision in the far north and the distance that people would need to travel.

Dornoch, Brora and Helmsdale

Members were concerned about the withdrawal of full service point provision from all 3 communities.

Dornoch was seen to rely heavily on registration provision, especially weddings. Tourism and the partnership with Visit Scotland was seen as critical to the community, and the community felt very strongly that the service point should be retained in full.

With regard to Brora and Helmsdale, both of these communities were seen as fragile and in the case of Brora, had already been through a major upheaval with the move of the service point to the library.

Helmsdale is already part of a one stop shop for customers and as such there would be concern if the service point element of this is be removed and the impact on the remaining services

For all locations public transport was a major issue and as such customers who needed to visit a service point under the consultation proposal would face a potentially difficult and extended journey on public transport, if this was at all possible.

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Section 5: Budget Consultation Feedback

During phase 2 of the 2014 Budget Consultation, a key question asked across all 3 surveys was whether respondents agreed or not with the 6 key principles developed by the Customer Services Board. If they disagreed with any of the principles, comments were invited as to why not. Many respondents used this as an opportunity to provide general comments about the importance of Service Points across Highland.

The feedback for each of the 3 surveys – Citizens' Panel, Communities Panel and Website (general public) – is outlined below.

Citizens' Panel Feedback – analysed by Centre for Remote and Rural Studies

Principles to Guide the Review of Customer Services	Respondents' Opinions				
	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Neither Agree or Disagree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
Need to offer a face to face point of contact for those who do not want to or cannot use technology, or for more complex enquiries	53.8	33.8	8.2	2.9	1.3
One solution will not suit all communities	40.9	47.6	8.4	2.1	0.6
It is about providing services not keeping buildings	40.7	41.7	13.6	3.5	0.6
Address the need for dealing with complex and confidential issues where there may not be a dedicated service point	35.0	48.0	14.4	2.0	0.5
Consider moving work out of Inverness to support staff working from home or other local locations	26.4	42.8	23.5	5.0	2.3
Adopting an appointment based Registration Service to enable a mobile service to replace a dedicated Registrar in some communities	14.5	41.8	30.0	9.6	4.1

N=1,182 -1,224

Some 87.6% agreed (including 53.8% strongly so) with the principle that there is a **"need to offer a face to face point of contact for those who do not want to or cannot use technology, or for more complex enquiries".** Some 4.2% disagreed (including 1.3% strongly) with this principle.

Some 88.5% agreed (including 40.9% strongly so) with the principle that **"one solution will not suit all communities".** Some 2.7% disagreed (including 0.6% strongly).

Some 82.4% agreed (including 40.7% strongly so) with the principle that **"it is about providing services not keeping buildings".** Some 4.1% disagreed (including 0.6% strongly).

Some 83% agreed (including 35% strongly so) with the principle that it is necessary to **"address the need for dealing with complex and confidential issues where there may not be a dedicated service point".** Some 2.5% disagreed (including 0.5% strongly) with this principle.

Some 69.2% agreed (including 26.4% strongly so) with the principle of "**considering moving work out of Inverness to support staff working from home or other local locations."** Some 7.3% disagreed (including 2.3% strongly so) with this principle. Some 16% of people with a disability disagreed with this principle compared with 6% of those who do not have a disability.

Some 56.3% agreed (including 14.5% strongly) with the principle of **"adopting an appointment based Registration Service to enable a mobile service to replace a dedicated Registrar in some communities".** Some 13.7% disagreed (including 4.1% strongly so) with this principle.

Looking at the six principles in summary, we note that **four** of them **have the agreement of more than 8 out of 10 respondents, one** has the **agreement of almost 7 out of 10** and **one** has the **agreement of a majority**. Only one of the principles incurs the disagreement of more than 1 in 10 of respondents – and that one is not far above that mark with the percentage disagreeing standing at 13.7% or between 1 in 7 and 1 in 8 of all respondents.

Invitation to Detail the Reasons for any Disagreements with the Principles

The Survey then said: **"If you indicated that you disagree or strongly disagree with any of the principles please detail why."** A blank space was provided and some 17.3% of respondents availed themselves of the opportunity to pass comment. By category of respondents the highest percentage of people who took this opportunity is found amongst those who have a disability (21%) – although that figure is not markedly higher than the response rate from respondents belonging to other categories.

Of the respondents who did comment **many took the opportunity to reinforce the need to apply the principles** that had been set before them. Thus there were 69 comments **emphasising the need for face to face provision** for those who cannot use computers or where the issue was complex. A further 25 people wanted to stress the **need to consider the elderly, the vulnerable and those living in rural areas**. Others wanted to stress that **each area within Highland has different needs** and these require to be considered individually. A few people (3) wondered why, if people did not want to use technology, they could not use the phone instead.

The principle with which most of those who detailed their views took issue was the one to do with the mobile registration service. This drew comments from 25 respondents with most of their concerns being around the length of time that people might need to wait for such a service. There was a strong feeling that people should not have to wait for such a service.

A number of people (14) expressed **strong reservations about plans to encourage working at home**. They felt that this was not productive and left people working in that way inaccessible. A further 3 people thought that **putting work out of Inverness ran the risk of fracturing key services**.

Communities Panel Survey

	Face to face contact	One solution won't suit all	Providing services, not keeping buildings	Relocating staff	Appointment based registrations	Space for dealing with private issues
Strongly agree	67%	59%	47%	39%	19%	62%
Agree	27%	38%	41%	44%	38%	33%
Neither agree nor disagree	4%	2%	8%	14%	25%	4%
Disagree	1%	1%	4%	1%	12%	1%
Strongly disagree	1%	1%	0%	2%	7%	1%
Total responses	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Over 80% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with 5 of the principles outlined to guide the review of customer services. Whilst the majority of groups still agreed with the principle around *appointment based registrations*, a quarter neither agreed nor disagreed and a fifth disagreed with the proposal.

Qualitative comments

A number of groups expressed concern about the principle of an appointment based registrar. It was noted that a dedicated registrar who knows people is extremely important when dealing with the bereaved. The most significant concern however was around potential timescales and this service not being available when people needed it.

A number of general comments were also made about the Council needing to be contactable by all its users. Concern was expressed about disadvantaging certain users if things are moved online as not everyone has or is able to access information in this way. It was also noted that those with complex needs will require face to face support.

There was support for the principle of moving work out from HQ to ensure that people are busy but maintaining a face to face service. It was also suggested that more buildings could be shared with other organisations e.g. public sector /post offices/ tourist info.

Website Survey Feedback

	Face to face contact	One solution won't suit all	Providing services, not keeping buildings	Relocate staff	Appoint-ment based registration	Space for dealing with private issues
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Strongly agree	52%	46%	35%	25%	15%	40%
Agree	35%	45%	47%	46%	43%	47%
Neither agree nor disagree	9%	6%	13%	24%	29%	12%
Disagree	3%	2%	4%	4%	9%	1%
Strongly Disagree	1%	1%	1%	1%	4%	1%
Total responses	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Over 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with four of the principles outlined to guide the review of customer services. **Over 70%** of respondents agreed with the proposal around relocating staff out of Inverness, however almost a quarter neither agreed nor disagreed with this. The majority of respondents also agreed with

appointment based registrations, however **29%** neither agreed nor disagreed with this and **13%** disagreed.

When looking at the results by area, **31%** of respondents in rural/ remote areas strongly agreed that we should consider relocating staff out of Inverness, compared with **23%** of respondents in Inner Moray Firth areas.

15% of respondents that rent from the Council disagreed with introducing an appointment based registration system, compared to **8%** of respondents in other housing.

Qualitative Comments

Respondents were asked to provide comment on any of the principles which they disagreed or strongly disagreed with. 638 separate comments were made on this question.

The importance of face to face contact
There was a strong view expressed by respondents commenting on this question of the importance of face to face services for the elderly, disabled and vulnerable. It was noted that face to face services were necessary for a number of people either because they do not have access to the internet or are unable to use it. Older people were specifically mentioned as being vulnerable but also individuals with sight or hearing difficulties, individuals with learning disabilities and people who may have literacy or numeracy difficulties.

Some views received noted that even telephone contact will not always be appropriate for individuals either because they struggle to hear or because they find it difficult to explain things over the telephone. Certain comments noted that elderly people in particular feel more secure talking to someone face to face. It was also reported that automated services can be very frustrating and that it often leads to people having to wait as queries are passed on.

Concern was expressed at what would happen to individuals should a face to face provision no longer be available locally. It was suggested that some vulnerable individuals may no longer make contact with services, with their needs going unaddressed. It was noted the important social role that service points play in many communities, especially for those who are socially isolated, and that staff know and understand the needs of their community.

Some views were expressed that certain individuals will not have any family locally to assist them access services either via the internet or the telephone whilst others noted the importance of elderly people feeling independent and not having to rely on others to carry out their business.

A number of views received noted that, in general, people prefer to deal with someone face to face but also that it was important to ensure equity and equality of access for all.

Complex and confidential enquiries

Comments were received that noted that many of the enquires dealt with at service points are complex and the importance of ensuring these can be dealt with face to face. It was suggested that a professional can better understand a person's needs in person, explain things and can diffuse situations. It was noted that this was important when dealing with complex, personal issues such as financial or housing matters especially in a time of crisis.

There was agreement from a number of respondents about the importance of having private space to discuss confidential issues.

A concern was noted that if service points were not available then dealing with individuals in crisis would be left to third sector organisations and that this would be unfair.

Appointment based registration

Many respondents expressed concern around the principle of an appointment based mobile Registrar. It was suggested that a Registrar deals with the most important events in someone's life and therefore a dedicated Registrar is needed in each community as a personal service is important.

A common statement made by respondents expressing concern around this approach was that *'people don't die by appointment'*. It was suggested that at a time of bereavement, people should not have to wait for an appointment and that this may result in additional stress and in delays to funeral arrangements. Concern was also noted at the need to register births and deaths within a specific time frame and whether a mobile service would be able to cope with this. It was suggested that this approach wouldn't offer the flexibility required.

Other points noted was whether this new approach would be designed to fit in with public transport provision, particularly in rural areas, and that a mobile service could be unreliable service in winter. It was suggested that ultimately this could cost more in terms of staff travel.

However, some respondents were in favour of this approach and noted that appointments would work well as long as the system was reliable. Some respondents noted that an appointment based system was already working well in their area. One respondent reported that their community doesn't have a service

point therefore widening access through this approach would be positive. It was suggested there needs to be an easy way to make appointments.

General support for principles
Many respondents expressed support in general for the principles outlined. It was noted that a phone service was an acceptable replacement for face to face provision as all generations can use this and that other organisations and services already utilise this approach. Some reported that it was not efficient to have someone/offices within each community and that given current offices are underused; there were better ways of providing services to individuals.

Some respondents noted that it was important to ensure that everyone still had access to a service but advocated an appointment or surgery based approach or home visits to the vulnerable. It was suggested that it would be important for the Council to come out to rural areas than expecting people to travel.

There were some comments received that suggested services were more important than buildings and that the Council could provide access in other locations – libraries, other public sector buildings, sharing Council buildings with others or post offices in rural areas.

A general mobile service point service was advocated by some given that many communities already do not have access to a service point and it was noted this would increase provision and access.

If was suggested that if more services were going to put online there would be a need to improve the Council's website.

Council presence in communities
There were a number of comments received that stated the importance of a Council presence within a local community. It was suggested that the Council is there to provide a service and be responsive to customers therefore offices need to enable access. Concern was also expressed that the Council is already disconnected from communities and that service points provide the link locally.

The needs of rural communities
Concern was expressed by some respondents that any changes in the way the Council provides services would impact upon rural areas. It was noted that the needs of urban and rural communities are different and the impact of the loss of services can be greater in a rural area. Views were expressed that rural areas should also be entitled to a level of service.

Some respondents suggested that if services were no longer available locally, it would mean longer journeys for customers in rural areas and for others, without

access to transport, they would no longer be able to access a service. It was reported by some individuals that there was too much of a focus on the cost of services in rural areas and that closing means moving the cost on to individuals to travel further.

Concerns were expressed that the centralisation of services was damaging rural areas and that local Council jobs were important to the economy of a rural area. It was noted that the loss of jobs in a rural community had a greater impact than in an urban area and support for the principle of moving out from Inverness.

However, some views were received that felt there was a need to consider each community individually and that some communities would need this service but others wouldn't. Some respondents reported that it was the service that was important and not the building and therefore if services can be provided in a different way then this was positive. Some views also expressed concern at the cost implications of moving any jobs out of Inverness and suggested that this would not provide good value for money.

Home working
A number of respondents specifically commented upon the principle of staff working from home. In the main these views expressed concern about this approach suggesting it would not improve customer services and that they would not be happy to receive a service from someone not in a Council office. Concern was expressed around the confidentiality of this approach.

Some views noted that this would result in an ineffective and inefficient service as it requires the staff member to work unsupervised. It was also noted that some jobs cannot be done remotely.

However, there was some support expressed for this approach and noted that this could be a solution for rural areas where the population is low. It was reported that this approach was positive for the business and that home working was efficient given the reduction in office costs and the need to travel. However, it was noted that this should be optional and not a requirement for staff.

Customer Service Consultation- DRAFT REPORT
Appendix 1

Community Groups Responding

Community Group	Service Point/Area	Community Group	Service Point/Area
Sunart Community Council	Acharacle	The congregation of Fort Augustus and Glengarry	Fort Augustus
Acharacle Community Council	Acharacle	Fort Augustus and Glenmoriston Community Council	Fort Augustus
West Ardnamurchan Community Council.	Acharacle	Fortrose and Rosemarkie Community Council	Fortrose
Boat of Garten and Vicinity Community Council	Aviemore and Grantown	Gairloch Community Council	Gairloch
Badenoch & Strathspey Access Panel	Badenoch & Strathspey	Wester Loch Ewe Community Council	Gairloch,
Naver Teleservice Centre	Bettyhill	Cromdale and Advie Community Council.	Grantown on Spey
North & West Sutherland CAB	Bettyhill, Durness and Lochinver	Grantown Community Council	Grantown on Spey
Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust	Bonar Bridge	Lochardil and Drummond Community Council	Hilton
Creich Community Council	Bonar Bridge	Hilton, Milton and Castle Heather Community Council	Hilton- Inverness
Ardgay & District Community Council	Bonar Bridge	Kilmuir & Logie Easter Community Council	Invergordon
Sleat, Broadford and Strath, Kyleakin and Kylerhea, Sconser and Raasay Community Councils joint response	Broadford	Lochaber Disability Access Panel	Lochaber – Kinlochleven, Mallaig, Acharacle, Kilchoan
Broadford and Strath Community Council	Broadford	Kingussie and Vicinity Community Council	Kingussie
Kyleakin & Kylerhea Community Council	Broadford	Newtonmore Community Council	Kingussie
Sleat Community Council	Broadford	Lochalsh Community Council	Kyle of Lochalsh
Brora Community Council	Brora	Lochcarron Community Council	Lochcarron / Shieldaig and Applecross
Ferintosh CC	Dingwall, Muir of Ord and Alness	Nethy Bridge and Vicinity Community Council	Strathspey
Dornoch Community Council	Dornoch	Headway Highland	Inverness
Helmsdale and District Community Council	Helmsdale	Helmsdale Community Centre	Helmsdale