

Forward Plan reference number: FP/491/08/22

Report title: Introduction of Home Office visa and citizenship application service to Chelmsford Library	
Report to: Councillor Louise McKinlay - Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance	
Report author: Juliet Pirez, Head of Libraries	
Date: 17th November 2022	For: Decision
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County Divisions affected: Chelmsford	

1. Everyone's Essex

- 1.1 As part of Everyone's Essex, a refreshed plan for the Library Service has been launched, which covers a range of agendas, but with a specific focus on Levelling Up and Climate Change. The new plan, "Everyone's Library Service 2022 – 2026", sets clear outcomes to support the wider ambitions of Essex County Council (ECC) for its residents. The high-level aims set out in the plan are built on three pillars: Library Service and Literacy; Communications and Infrastructure; Supporting Communities and Levelling Up.
- 1.2 This paper is seeking approval to incorporate a UK Visa and Citizenship Application Service (UKVCAS) service point in Chelmsford Library and for ECC as Essex Libraries Service to provide the UKVCAS visa services to residents under contract with Libraries Connected. This will help the service to achieve the Supporting Communities and Levelling Up ambitions of the plan.
- 1.3 The initiative aligns with the aims of the Everyone's Essex by supporting all the parts of our population who need it, being a foundation for levelling up and helping families to thrive.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Agree to have a UK Visa and Citizenship Application Service (UKVCAS) service point in Chelmsford Library.
- 2.2 Agree to enter into a contract with Libraries Connected to deliver the visa service for a term of 1 year at a value of £240,000

3 Background and Proposal

- 3.1 Libraries Connected (formerly the Society of Chief Librarians) is a registered company and charity. Libraries Connected is a sub-contractor of Sopra Steria who is a digital services company that is contracted by the Home Office to deliver the UKVCAS.
- 3.2 The Essex Libraries Service have been approached by Libraries Connected to deliver the Home Office's Visa and Citizenship Application Service (UKVCAS)

from Chelmsford Library and it is proposed that ECC will enter a contract with Libraries Connected for provision of the Visa Services for one year commencing 1st December 2022 to formalise the arrangements.

- 3.3 The UKVCAS service is the system for processing immigration applications made from within the UK for further leave to remain, including all extension applications, and any switching between visas, as well as applications for both settlement and citizenship.
- 3.4 Libraries Connected is subcontracted to provide the Home Office's visa application service and the service is currently operated from a rented office in Chelmsford. They are planning to cease this arrangement and deliver from a more permanent site in Chelmsford. UKVCAS already operates through a number of other libraries within the UK, and Libraries Connected has identified Chelmsford Library as a delivery site.
- 3.5 Chelmsford Library would be the only provision within the County and data shows a considerable, ongoing demand for the service in Essex. This report therefore seeks approval to run UKVCAS service from Chelmsford Library and enter a contract with Libraries Connected to deliver visa application services on their behalf. Essex Libraries Service will benefit from a new income stream which will go towards mitigating an existing pressure on income targets.
- 3.6 Chelmsford Library are well placed to deliver this service. Essex County Council Libraries are renowned as a trusted service and a safe space and are well aligned to the Levelling Up agenda, providing inclusive, accessible services for all residents. Chelmsford Library benefits from being situated near to good public transport links, parking facilities and the Library itself has sufficient space to dedicate to the service point.
- 3.7 It is proposed that the UKVCAS services provided by ECC commences at Chelmsford Library on 1st December 2022. Prior to this, Sopra Steria will hire space within the library to deliver the service in the interim period, so the appropriate technology and furnishings will already be in place. This arrangement is documented under an existing service level agreement between ECC and Sopra Steria under which Sopra Steria also has a licence to occupy the space.
- 3.8 The service will operate at Chelmsford Library within normal library opening hours. The library is open Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday 9am to 5.30pm, Thursday 9am to 7pm, Saturday 9am to 5pm and Sunday 10.30 to 1.30pm.
- 3.9 Provision of this service will require the recruitment of 2 specialist Customer Service Assistant roles on fixed term contracts funded from income received through operating the service. Libraries Connected will arrange all training and required pre-employment checks are to be carried out by Sopra Steria. Sopra Steria shall also provide ongoing support over the telephone as required.

- 3.10 ECC will work with Sopra Steria with support from Libraries Connected to ensure appointment availability is accurately reflected on the web based booking system (hosted by Sopra Steria) and KPIs are being met. Appointment availability may be subject to variation. There is no charge for use of the system and as all personal data and processed documentation including scans of hard copies is uploaded to the system, there are no data protection considerations locally. All hard copies are immediately returned within the appointment slot by hand to the applicant
- 3.11 It is proposed that ECC will contract with Libraries Connected until 30th November 2023 to provide the services on a sub-contractor basis. The contract will be for a maximum of £240,000 depending on the number of people using it.
- 3.12 Under the contract, ECC will be responsible to provide the services to the public using the booking system and equipment provided by Libraries Connected and Sopra Steria. ECC will be paid for appointments according to an established fee schedule and will invoice Libraries Connected monthly.
- 3.13 ECC will be consulted regarding any extension period after the initial 1 year. In the event that the contract is not extended, the service can be discontinued and the fixed term staff released. ECC are also not obliged to agree to any extension. At the end of the contract, ECC will be under an obligation to assist with the transfer of the services back to Libraries Connected. Any extension will be subject to a further decision by ECC
- 3.14 As ECC is a subcontractor to deliver the visa services, there may be a delay in payment coming to ECC for the Services. If this is the case, ECC will need to pay for the cost of running the services until paid. This is unlikely and mitigated by a monthly invoicing arrangement to ensure prompt payment.

4 Links to our Strategic Ambitions

4.1 This report links to the following aims in the Essex Vision

- Enjoy life into old age
- Provide an equal foundation for every child
- Strengthen communities through participation
- Connect us to each other and the world
- Share prosperity with everyone

For more information about Essex Vision visit www.essexfuture.org.uk

4.2 This report links to the following strategic priorities in the emerging Organisational Strategy 'Everyone's Essex':

- A strong, inclusive and sustainable economy
- Health wellbeing and independence for all ages
- A good place for children and families to grow

5 Options

- 5.1 Do nothing (**Not Recommended**): This will result in the Council missing an opportunity to enhance the services available in Chelmsford Library which is beneficial to the residents of Essex and the opportunity of a new income stream will be missed. Everyone's Library Strategy is committed to exploring new commercial opportunities to support the service. This would help fulfil this commitment.
- 5.2 Set up the Service Point for UKVCAS in Chelmsford Library (**Recommended Option**): The UKVCAS Service Point will be set up at the Chelmsford Library and delivered by ECC to the residents through a contract with Libraries Connected. The service has been delivered in the Chelmsford area by Sopra Steria to date and so Chelmsford Library will ensure continuation of the service in the same locality to maintain accessibility. Sopra Steria have experienced high demand for appointments and this is anticipated to continue, instilling confidence that this will be a reliable income source for Essex County Council and a well used resource by Essex residents. It is a good opportunity to increase footfall and usage of the library as applicants will be able to see the other services on offer while attending their appointment. We want to encourage membership to the library and showcase all our resources both physically and online.

6 Issues for consideration

6.1 Financial implications

- 6.1.1 There are minimal initial set up costs involved. Technology Services will instruct ECC's existing supplier DUCL to install additional hardware and cabling. Cost of installation and fee for the year is £4,650. This cost will be met by the Library service. Furniture will be re-located from elsewhere in County Hall, where Chelmsford Library is located, at no cost. Sopra Steria owned and maintained laptops and other equipment will be provided to Chelmsford Library through Libraries Connected and will be kept securely at the library. The annual cost of two new members of staff (salary and on costs) is approximately £53,000 (£26,500 per FTE). This cost of the staff will be met by income for appointments completed from Libraries Connected. There are no minimum targets to meet, but the fee structure is such that there is a financial incentive to maximise the number of bookable appointments. As payment is passported through Libraries Connected from Sopra Steria, if they do not receive payment or it is delayed we will also be impacted. We expect to bill Libraries Connected on a monthly basis.
- 6.1.2 With just the two dedicated members of staff and maximum appointments delivered, income achieved could be up to £200,000. With additional staff trained to cover one desk at lunchtime, income levels could be up to £240,000. This requires 2 desks to operate delivering maximum appointments achievable within the existing library opening hours. There are unquantified overtime costs that may be incurred. A net surplus between £147,000 and £187,000 may therefore be generated that will contribute towards closing the forecast income

budget gap. Historically, Sopra Steria have been able to achieve these income levels from their Chelmsford office, so it is understood demand at this level will persist into the future. The income has been modelled on 78 appointments a week for two desks as the minimum and 92 appointments for 2 desks as the maximum (such numbers have been adjusted then for days closed). The core rates payable by Libraries Connected to ECC are set out under the contract. The rates vary depending on the bands of average weekly appointments per desk achieved in a calendar month. The contract with Libraries Connected is for a fixed term of 1 year and the recruitment is for a fixed term to align with this. If it is found not to be sustainable due to lower appointment levels, the job description for the fixed term staff is similar to a regular Customer Service Assistant and be redeployed within the Library service where there are current vacancies.

6.2 Legal implications

6.2.1 While Sopra Steria is delivering services from Chelmsford Library (prior to ECC delivering the services), a lease or licence will be required to clearly define the rights and obligations of the parties. A licence to occupy has been incorporated into the existing service agreement between Sopra Steria and ECC for the services to be carried out by Sopra Steria during the period 3rd October 2022 to 30th November 2022.

6.2.2 ECC will be required to enter into a contract for the provision of services and must be satisfied that it will be able to provide the services in accordance with the contractual requirements. The Contract needs to be compliant with ECC's data processing requirements. Obligations under the main contract between Sopra Steria and Libraries Connected flows down and are incorporated into the contract between ECC and Libraries Connected. there will need to be sufficient provisions in the contract to ensure ECC's liability is limited and ECC are correctly indemnified.

6.2.3 In taking on new employees, ECC will have exposure to all potential liabilities related to employment in addition to salaries.

6.2.4 Any new duties added to the roles for existing employees will need to be considered for any existing impact on pay and conditions.

7 Equality and Diversity Considerations

- 7.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:
- (a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful
 - (b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

- (c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

- 7.2 The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).
- 7.3 The Equalities Comprehensive Impact Assessment indicates that the proposals in this report will not have a disproportionately adverse impact on any people with a particular characteristic.

8 List of Appendices


Appendix 1 Equalities Comprehensive Impact Assessment

9 List of Background papers

Everyone's Library Service 2022 – 2026

I approve the above recommendations set out above for the reasons set out in the report.	Date
Councillor Louise McKinlay, Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance	21/11/2022

In consultation with:

Role	Date
Suzanna Shaw, Director of Customer Services 	21.11.2022
Executive Director, Corporate Services (\$151 Officer) Stephanie Mitchener [on behalf of] Nicole Wood	27 th Sept 2022
Director, Legal and Assurance (Monitoring Officer) Laura Edwards on behalf of Paul Turner	21.11.2022