

Rochford District Council

ACCESS TO COUNCIL SERVICES Public Consultation Report

Dale Hall
Opinion Research Services
Spin-out Company of the
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ROCHFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of Public Consultation on Access to Council Services

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Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Rochford District Council in conducting the research reported here, not only because public perceptions about access to council services are interesting and important, but also because the study will potentially inform the council's future policies.

We are grateful to the focus group members who took part in meetings that considered access to various council services across the district. The participants shared their views readily and also deliberated on the views raised by others. We are pleased that they generally enjoyed the process and we trust that this concise report accurately reflects their views and priorities.

We would also like to thank Rochford District Council for commissioning the project and providing assistance and advice throughout. We are especially grateful to Simon Pitt for his co-ordination and helpfulness throughout the project.

At all stages of the study ORS' status as an independent organisation consulting the public as objectively as possible was respected by the council. We trust that this report will inform future policies in the Rochford district.

1. Commission and Methodology

1.1 The Commission

ORS was commissioned by Rochford District Council to convene, facilitate and report four focus group discussions with members of the public from four different areas in the district, and also to conduct a concise survey of the public. ORS worked in collaboration with Rochford District Council to prepare some standard survey questions and discussion framework for each of the four meetings, which also provided key information to the participants about the following issues:

- Structure of local government in Essex
- Services provided by Rochford District Council
- The council website.

The focus group discussions covered the following main topic areas:

- Participants' previous contact with the council
- Preferred and future methods of contacting the council
- Improvement of facilities for accessing council services
- Provision of information about the council
- Use of the council website
- Further needs – for possible one-stop-shop, telephone answer centre.

Using the structured discussion agendas, the focus group meetings lasted for about one-hour-thirty minutes.

In conjunction with a recruitment exercise for Rochford District Council's Citizens Panel, local residents were asked some questions on their preferred methods of contacting the council and their likely ways of contacting the council in the future. The questionnaire was distributed to 9,000 households in the district, and 1,028 were returned, yielding a response rate of 11%. All data has been weighted by age and gender to ensure it is representative of the local population. The results from these questions have been combined with findings from the four focus groups.

1.2 Inclusiveness and Representativeness

Focus Groups

Four focus groups cannot provide a full statistical microcosm of Rochford's residents, but they certainly included a wide and diverse range of local people. Residents were recruited from volunteers for a Citizens' Panel and were selected with quotas to ensure that there was a broad cross-section of people by age, gender, tenure and social background. For each focus group, participants were invited by ORS and, as standard practice, were paid an allowance for their trouble and expenses in attending and taking part in detailed discussions. No-one was excluded from the meetings on the ground of any personal or group characteristics; and proper access arrangements were in place for those with disabilities.

The meetings took place in four different locations on three separate days:

Residents of Rayleigh and Hockley met in Rayleigh Civic Offices on Monday 22nd October at 6pm and 7.45pm, when 9 and 6 people attended respectively

Residents of Rochford met in The Freight House, Rochford on Tuesday 23rd October at 6pm, when 11 attended

Residents of Great Wakering met in Wakering Community Centre on Wednesday 24th October at 6pm, when 6 attended.

There were good reasons for using discussion groups for this consultation programme. Focus groups are conversational forums through which people's ideas may be analysed in depth through the open-ended exchange of ideas. They are qualitative rather than quantitative in nature – conceptual rather than statistical, and interpretative rather than mathematical. They are concerned with the diversity, meaning and intensity of people's views rather than with their statistical distribution. The discussions explored not just participants' instant opinions (when asked an artificially simplified set of questions) but also their arguments and assumptions – aspects that cannot be covered in a quantitative study. Therefore, we are satisfied that the outcomes of the meetings are soundly indicative of how informed public opinion in Rochford would incline on the basis of similar discussions. In summary, then, the meetings are reliable examples of the reflections and opinions of diverse people.

Citizens' Panel Recruitment Survey

Local residents were asked questions about how they contact the District Council and how they are likely to do so in future through a quantitative recruitment exercise for Rochford's Citizens' Panel. The questionnaire was distributed to 9,000 households in the district, of which 1,028 returned their forms – an 11% response rate. The findings from these questions have been weighted by age and gender to ensure they are representative of the local population; and they have been combined with findings from the four focus groups.

The Report

Some verbatim quotations appear in this report, not because we endorse those opinions but to illustrate recurrent points of view vividly. While quotations are used, the report is not just a transcript of the discussions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants. While summarising the main themes and highlighting the key points, this report seeks to be faithful to what was said.

The four focus groups were similar in their general views about access to services – so their perspectives have largely been combined in an overall report, except where it was necessary to highlight the Great Wakering views to compare them with views in Rochford and Rayleigh.

2. Main Findings

2.1 Introduction

This report draws together the main themes and issues as expressed in the focus group discussions and, where appropriate, the Citizens' Panel survey.

2.2 Contact with the Council

Rochford and Rayleigh

The focus groups were all extremely positive about how easy it is to contact Rochford Council. Some typical statements were:

It's easy – there's a list of telephone numbers which I've kept –that is easier than the switchboard

The list came out with the Council Tax guide

It's easy but the list is helpful – it was harder before to look upon the website if I didn't know the department

It's very easy – I was in Basildon before where it was harder

They put you through to the right person very well – the switchboard will help to get you through

Some departments have automated numbers with menus – you tap in the details – this is excellent – I was surprised at how good this is!

However, some said that it is easy to get through (be answered) but there can be difficulties in being redirected by the switchboard to the right department or person:

It's easy to get through – but hard to get to the right person – you get passed on from one to another

You get put through but it is not always correct and they are not always there – so you're always chasing them.

Great Wakering

Great Wakering residents also said it is generally easy to contact the Council – for example:

It's easy – there are no problems by phone or bus to Rochford

The website for information has been fine and the phone is fine

I used the website to look up planning applications and it was user-friendly

That would be the first place I'd look

The website is good for information and I've had good replies to the comments I've made there

Today I rang the operator and they rang me back very effectively.

However, two specific suggestions were made:

They should have a call logging system to record and deal with your query – it can be hard to get to the same person each time

They need to show on the website who does what: the County or District.

Most Recent contact with the council

A wide range of participants in the focus groups had contacted Rochford Council relatively recently for a wide range of matters, including:

- Collection of furniture waste
- Lowering curb outside house
- Waste collection
- Bees in garden
- De-restriction of parking for funeral
- Planning issues
- Council tax benefits
- Street lighting
- Sports booking
- Building control
- Enquiry about un-adopted road
- Missing drain cover
- Refurbishing a scout hut.

Overall, people had found the Council to be responsive and effective:

I got through and then they dealt with me ok when I got on to the department – and they rang me back

I try to find who to contact from the website and when I have got my information from there it's easy to get through

On the last two occasions (I rang them once and wrote the next time) and they sent me emails in reply – I was impressed!

I called Rochford Council today about schools, but I was redirected – and even put through to the right place in the County!

I phoned them yesterday for housing benefit- it was easy and the switchboard and department were very helpful.

Times of contact

Most people had contacted the Council by phone within normal working hours – usually between 0900 and 1500 – and they found those times had worked well for telephone contact.

People were unaware that they could contact the Council before between 0800 and 0900 – and, significantly, they were pessimistic that any worthwhile service could be offered as early as 0800, mainly because they believed most council staff would not be in work at that time.

Those using the internet to contact the Council appreciated the convenience of being able to send emails or complete forms at any times of the day or night. This was seen as a distinct advantage of the internet.

Modes of Contact

Most focus group respondents had used the phone for their last contact with the Council, but some had completed forms on the internet; and one used automatic phone menus.

Preferred methods of contacting the council – and their advantages

Most people found the telephone particularly convenient for contacting the Council – for example:

By telephone you get an instant response – which is convenient

It's good if it's urgent

It's easy to talk to someone to explain in words

You can use automated numbers – for refuse collection for large items.

The results from the postal survey reveal that the majority of respondents prefer to contact the council by telephone – as figure 1 shows below.

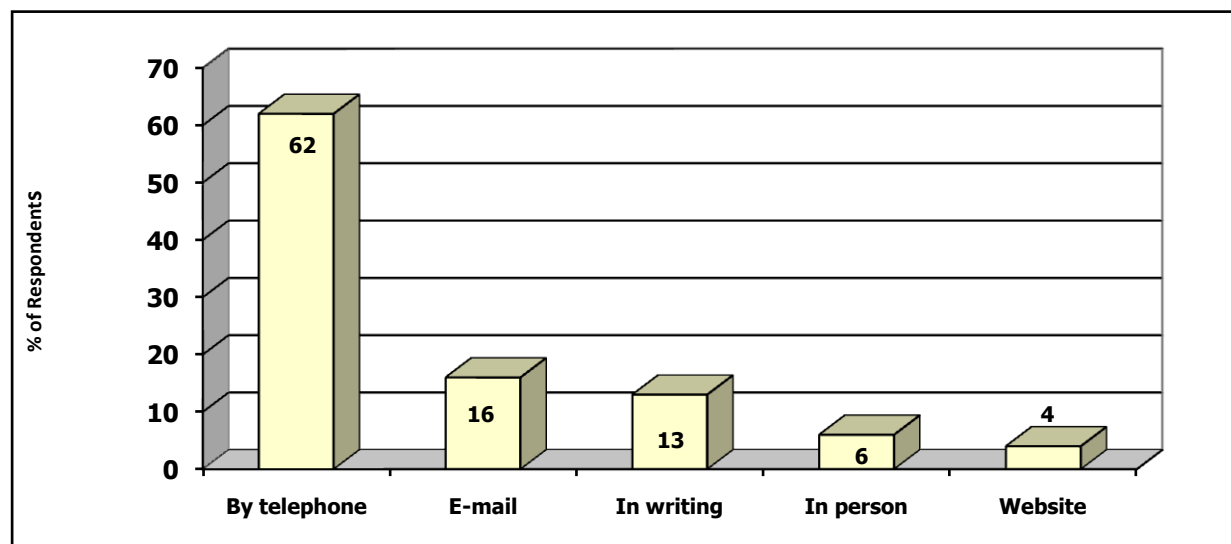


Figure 1: How do you prefer to contact Rochford District Council at the moment?

However, the same survey also showed that a quarter of those aged 16-34 year and 21% of those aged 35-44 years prefer to contact the council by e-mail – whereas only 5% of those over 65 prefer to use this method.

As we have seen, these results were borne out in the focus groups. When asked how they prefer to contact Rochford Council the great majority of people in the focus groups strongly preferred the telephone – mainly because:

You get instant feedback and can discuss anything necessary with a real person!

Some focus group respondents preferred the internet – mainly because it is more convenient – and they had had very positive experiences of Rochford's efficient and accessible website:

It is more time effective to email at any time of the day or night

I can do it from work – which is convenient!

You can look at planning applications on line as well – and it is up to date – it's really good and effective! I got notice of an application and it was on the website the same day it went in!

I like to fill forms in on-line – and you can make planning applications on-line

I look at the website to see where to send or who to contact

It's my first port of call for information.

Several focus group respondents had filled in their electoral roll on-line – it was convenient and effective for them.

As in the Citizens' Panel survey, it was clear from the focus groups that younger residents like using email and the internet much more than more elderly people.

Visiting Council Offices

The prospect of visiting the Council offices was seen as much less convenient than the phone or internet – especially for commuters and workers generally. People also said that:

The Rayleigh offices cannot do very much – the real ones are at Rochford

You have to travel to Rochford!

Neither [Rayleigh nor Rochford offices] are convenient for those who work.

By personal visit to Rayleigh or Rochford

Going to the offices is a last resort for most enquiries – but they're very helpful for planning issues.

Future methods of contacting the council

The postal survey showed that nearly six in ten (57%) of respondents are most likely to want to contact the council by telephone in the future. Despite being the most popular response, the figure is 5% points less than those who prefer to contact the council by telephone at the moment.

Conversely, more than a fifth (22%) of respondents are most likely to want to contact the council by e-mail in the future – a 6% percentage point increase on those who prefer to contact the council by e-mail at the moment. For those aged 16-34 years the proportion increased by 10% points, with over a third choosing e-mail as their preferred method of contact in the future.

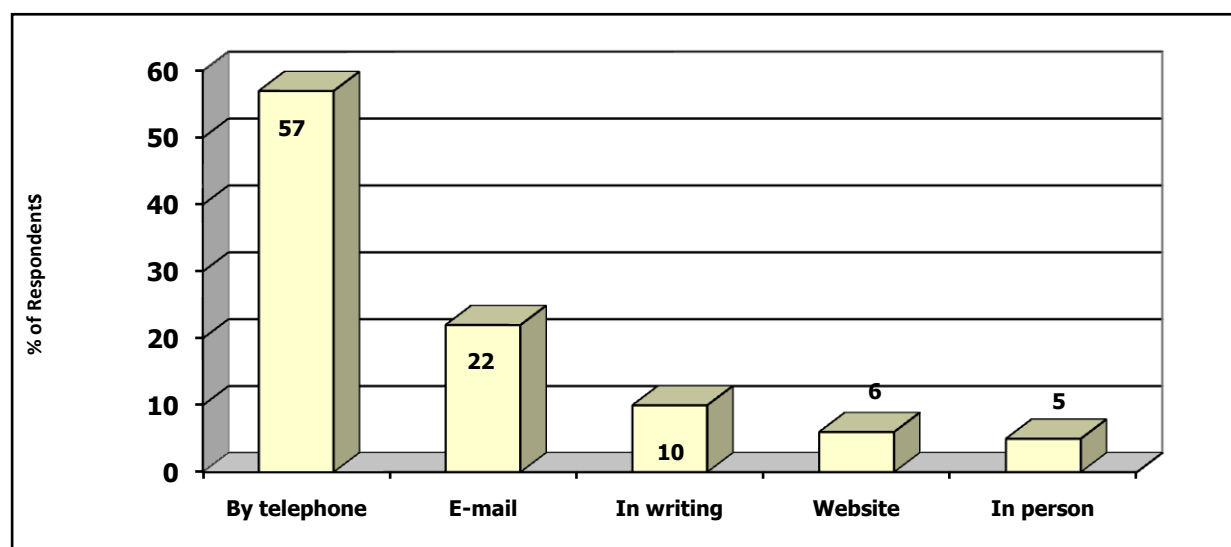


Figure 2: How are you most likely to want to contact Rochford District Council in the future?

The focus groups findings were consistent with those from the survey. Overwhelmingly, respondents said they would be most likely to contact Rochford Council in future by the same methods they are using now – that is, mainly by phone and internet. There were people who said they do not use the Council website but will do so in future (particularly after seeing it during the focus group and hearing how good it is from others present). It should be noted, though, that everyone said they would not use phone text to contact the Council.

Making future contacts easier

Residents were so satisfied with the methods for contacting the Council that they doubted that anything could be done to make the methods easier to use. There were, though, some constructive suggestions, as follows.

Suggested improvements to the telephone service

British Gas is difficult to contact but they have a good different number for disabled people – the Council could consider providing a dedicated number for people with real disabilities or hard of hearing

You need to be able to contact a person who can deal with most enquiries

They should take responsibility for dealing with you – not just putting you through – it saves you keep having to repeat the request and keep explaining what you want. And it needs to be a real human being – not just a menu computer

Freephone numbers to use for some key areas

Single emergency number for general advice out of hours – eg noise nuisance, etc.

An effective call logging system with reference numbers – so we can follow things up with different staff later on – but it has to be used in common sense way

We need to know people's names – to have an identified contact

Being called back as promised when necessary.

Improvements to visiting the offices

Trying to avoid people not having to visit!

Extended hours – on some week nights and on Saturday mornings

An Open Day to publicise the full range of service with the councillors present would be a good idea – and to have this on a Saturday or weekend

The Council should offer an effective appointments system for those having to visit the offices from places like Wakering.

Improvements to e-mail/website

It would be a good idea to list email addresses for each department in the directory of numbers that goes out with the CT bills

Ensure that someone deals with emails if a member of staff is away or on holiday.

2.3 Information on the Council

General

The focus groups were all extremely positive about how readily Rochford Council provides information – though it was recognised that some people have difficulties accessing it in practice.

Sources of information

The main sources of information were said to be:

Rochford Matters, the Council newsletter – many people said they read at least parts of this

The published list of council numbers

Official notice boards

Publicity sent out via schools – about holiday activities and events [though it was not clear if this is done for the County alone].

Weekly free papers

Website and phone books

Mailing lists from sports and leisure centres.

Improving access to information

There were some interesting suggestions for how to improve people's access to information about the Council – including:

- Increasing the frequency of Rochford Matters
- Calendar of events to be included in Rochford Matters – and on the Council website
- Open day at council offices to publicise services
- Website to include clear and prominent lists of District and County services to avoid confusion
- Longer opening hours at council offices
- Registering with the Council to receive e-mail newsletters (the same as the ones sent out)
- Sports and leisure centres to send out email newsletters of events
- Schools open days – about general council services and recycling
- Schools could give information on voting in local elections
- Libraries could be used more effectively – they have leaflets but they could be more comprehensive
- More posters for recreational events.

2.4 Possible Answer Centre

Satisfaction with current phone system

The four focus groups were all very happy with their current methods of contacting the Council – and thought the phone switchboard system works well in particular – so they were very dubious of possible proposals for a one-stop telephone 'answer centre'. They were generally very happy indeed for the current system to continue.

Doubts about possible telephone Answer Centre

It is true to say that most people in the focus groups were sceptical at best and at worst opposed to the proposals – because they thought that:

- Those working in the centre could actually deal with most enquiries
- It would be less efficient than contacting the departments
- The new system would not save time in practice
- It sounds like a cost cutting measure
- It would be less efficient – because *it would have to be a team and would need members of some key departments – how many would it need to make it effective?*

The general feeling about the possible new system was expressed:

- If it isn't broken, don't fix it!*
- The current system gets you through to the specialists – the answer centre would not be like this*
- We're all happy with the switchboard – it can put us through – and we don't want anything like a call centre!*
- Would they only deal with the issues superficially and give general advice?*
- I want to get to the specialist in the departments, who know*

But I think the switchboard just needs more training.

On the other hand, if residents could be assured that their main objections were groundless then it is possible they would feel more positive about the prospect of a new telephone answer centre. Even while rejecting an 'answer centre' some residents in Rochford still said:

You need to be able to contact a person who can deal with most enquiries

They should take responsibility for dealing with you – not just putting you through – it saves you keep having to repeat the request and keep explaining what you want. And it needs to be a real human being – not just a menu computer.

There were, though, some other positive comments about a new telephone answer centre:

An answer centre is a good name!

If you have a complex problem to deal with an answer centre could direct you properly and let you come back to them

But dealing with people would clog up the switchboard

You at least need a more knowledgeable switchboard

This could ease the number of calls that go into departments.

Overall, though, the general view was that switchboard is generally able either to deal with issues or to refer them onwards to the departments. The general sentiment was:

I'd go for this – you get to the specialists who really can deal with the enquiries!

2.5 Possible One-stop Shop in the Eastern Part of the District

Rayleigh and Rochford views

The Rayleigh focus groups were not convinced of the need for an additional 'one-stop shop' to provide services in the eastern part of the district – though they did acknowledge that:

This would be like Rayleigh for them

If you live on the east side, it would be helpful.

The main objection in Rayleigh was that the facility would be an expensive additional burden on the Council Tax that should be avoided.

In Rochford, though, there was an even more comprehensive acceptance that Woking is disadvantaged compared with the rest of the district:

This could be useful for Woking – it is awkward to travel to here for visits

The CAB could be incorporated in the one stop shop – and it could give job search information

Woking seems to be poorly served generally.

Woking views

Interestingly, the Woking participants were also dubious about the value of more local council offices – and they were concerned about the likely costs.

It sounds like just another way to spend money!

It don't think it is necessary!

They were not uninterested in innovative improvements, though, and they suggested that:

You could have a travelling office – like a travelling library or roadshow – to travel round for one day or evening per week or month in different places

You could also have a Freephone in the Library to contact the Council.

The general view was to be cautious about any increased costs – particularly because in their opinion the telephone and website are fine.

2.5 Increasing Use of the Council Website

Satisfaction with website

The four focus groups all showed considerable satisfaction with the current website – by those (a significant number) who use it. For example, they said:

There is a life-style change about the internet – I use it for everything

The council office is never open when I need it – but the website is good

I filled in my electoral forms by email

I look up planning applications

I used it to work out the Council Tax rebate for some friends – it was a good calculator – brilliant!

Not yet for everyone

However, others also pointed out that:

Not everyone has a computer at home or at work – they need other methods – so for me this would be a telephone or meeting face to face

Many people like the security of a known person to contact – especially more elderly people like my parents

Improving the Council website

Although the majority of people had not actually used the website much, there was a general feeling that it is good for many purposes – and people had relatively few suggestions of any improvements needed.

It's fine – the links on the right are very good and obvious.

I can use the internet, but I find it easier to phone the council because I'm a shift worker – so I choose not to use the website

Many people don't want computer contacts due to all the spam they get

For me the phone works and is fine – so I'll keep using it so long as it is OK.

The main original ideas for improving the Council website were:

Website should clearly show the division of services between the County and the Districts – so people know which to contact

People should be able to opt to receive all correspondence by email rather than paper (to save paper and postage)

Offer a prize draw for logging on to the website and registering to receive information

Publicise the response time to emails from the website – so people are reassured they will get a good response

The acknowledgement of emails needs to be as informative as possible

Use reference numbers to allow people to follow-up issues without confusion

Create a website section for younger people

Open day to show people how easy it is to access the Council website

Publish a directory of departmental email addresses

Encourage the public to register with the Council to receive regular information direct by email.

The key to the success of the website is that the information is up to date – it is infuriating when websites are not maintained.

Include a Notice Board section on the website for people to list their concerns or raise discussion points or make suggestions

Publicise big planning initiatives more systematically – and send notices of big plans to everyone registered by email

Include local news and community items

Publish a diary of events on the website.

Paying Council bills on-line

Significant numbers of focus group participants said that in principle they would be willing to pay their council bills on-line – but their main objection to doing so in practice was the that Direct Debit system works so well in letting them pay in stages.

There's no need – and direct debit is very good method.

Some could see, though, that:

It would save money to send invoices by email and to take payment on-line payment – like British Gas.

Overall, though, as a Wokingham resident expressed it, people had many objections:

I prefer to pay by Direct Debit and I don't like to put my bank details on the website. What incentive is there to change? Would you have to pay once a year only? There are no clear advantages to doing this.

2.6 Service Standards

Satisfaction with proposed standards

The four focus groups showed considerable general satisfaction with the proposed contact service standards – and in summary the responses were as follows:

Visitor waiting time: maximum of 10 minutes – approved

Telephone answer time: maximum of 15 seconds – approved

No confirmation of receipt of letter or fax – only partly approved; this should be done if requested by correspondent

Reply to letter or fax: within 5 days – approved but some feeling that replies should be received within five working days.

Confirmation of receipt of email: one day – approved

Reply to email: within five days – approved

Complaints: five days for an explanation or statement of progress – approved

The main exception to the general satisfaction concerned office opening times, which are dealt with below.

Some residents felt strongly that the service standards should be publicised prominently on the Council's website.

2.7 Office Opening Hours

Weekday early morning opening

The main comments about the current hours were that:

No one knows the offices are open at 0800 – and people are unlikely to phone or call in then (so this is probably done for the sake of staff flexitime rather than the public!)

Some weekend opening would be valuable

Some evening opening would be valuable

It is desirable to have better lunchtime cover for absent staff.

Some typical comments in support of these points were:

There is no point in 8 am. Does anyone use it?

I am surprised at the 8am opening – I never knew that!

I'm on the train by 8am! So 8am is no good for me or other commuters!

No one here has ever contacted the council before 9 am

I don't think 8 am is necessary – 9-6 might be better for many people

I'm surprised there's no Saturday morning

You need to have proper cover at lunchtimes as well

When Council asks for information you have to take time off work to take documents in – so evening working would be helpful or Saturday morning.

Improving opening hours – especially weekends, evenings and lunchtimes

All the focus groups had decided ideas on what could be done to make it easier for working people to visit the Council offices. For example, they said:

When I got married I had to take a half day off work to take in my certificate

Nine to six in the evening would be better than opening at 8 am

You need late evening opening – at least one night a week

They should open at least one Saturday morning a month

The people who need to call in would need a office with longer hours here [Rayleigh]

The offices should be open more for visits as well as phone calls – because you could phone up in the week even if you are at work

You'd only need to open on Saturdays mornings and not on Sundays

One night a week for opening would be good.

There was a clear general feeling, then, that the council should:

Stagger staff lunchtimes to ensure a good service is maintained

Open offices from 0900 to 0600

Open offices on Saturday mornings

Open offices in the evening on at least one night per week.

However, respondents in Wakering particularly were keen that the more flexible opening hours (if adopted) should not mean overtime rates being paid to Council staff.