

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: October 2020

Subject: Customer Portfolio

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Sam Kane

Recommending:

That the report of the Customer Portfolio Holder be noted

1 The period since my last report to Council has seen Customer Services continue to play an important role in helping the Council and Community to recover from the effects of the national Covid lockdown.

Revenues and Benefits

2 The Revenues team completed the process of issuing the Business Grants for the Government's Covid schemes including the Discretionary Scheme which followed during the summer. In all £32m was issued to businesses across the district.

3 Following on from recent Government announcements relating to Test and Trace procedures it announced a new scheme for those who are required to self-isolate for up to 14 days, cannot work from home and are on low incomes and in receipt of qualifying benefits. Successful applicants receive a £500 payment. Local authorities are required to administer the scheme which is funded by Government. The scheme is now live in Epping Forest and full details are available on the Council's website.

4 Recovery action has restarted to collect outstanding Council Tax and Business Rates. A 'soft' reminder notice was issued with an emphasis on encouraging people to come forward to help them with payment arrangements, including extended terms. A formal reminder notice has since been issued to 3,800 households and further notices will be issued through the year to help maximise these key income streams.

5 The processing of Benefit claims is in a stable position ahead of an expected rise in unemployment later this year as Furlough arrangements change. New claims during Q2 were being processed in 11.07 days compared with 15.56 days in Q2 2019. Caseload has stabilised for the time being at just over 7,000 claims for Local Council Tax Support. Members are reminded that most new claims for working age Housing Benefit will claim for this through Universal Credit now. In terms of channel shift I am pleased to report that 83% of new claims that the Council does process are now made on-line compared with 50% at the start of the financial year.

6 The EFDC Benefits team have signed up to the Housing Benefit Accuracy Award Initiative and the performance of the team is in the top quartile and has received recognition from the DWP in respect of this.

Customer Services

6 The Customer Services team was central to the front-line response to the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst the Covid hotline remains active the resources supporting the team have reduced in line with call volumes and will similarly be increased should customer demand rise.

7 The Broadway office and Waltham Abbey library have opened for those who wish to pay by cash and was timed to coincide with the reinstatement of Revenues recovery action.

8 The Service has also welcomed two new Team Managers covering the roles of Louise Warren and Nikki Gambrell who have undertaken internal secondments in the Business Services team. The two new Team Managers are Jack Cooper and Tracy Scott. In addition two Lead Officer posts have been recruited to, giving added resilience, these are Louis Walton and Leanne Austin.

9 As Members may have seen the Council took part in the National Customer Service Week run by the Institute of Customer Service. The week involved a range of activities undertaken by staff which were themed each day. The week was a success with good levels of engagement by staff and the results and learnings from the week will be taken to the Stronger Communities Select Committee.

10. The first stage of a 'Customer Shoes' behavioural training pilot has been completed and initial staff feedback is extremely positive. Using an external provider; the Impact Factory, the training was run virtually and included twelve staff from a mix of service areas. A particular focus was given to dealing with difficult customers, staff feedback from the Customer Service week reinforced this is a key area our employees want support with, in particular while working virtually. Staff feedback will now help to shape the next stage of pilot.

10 A new Out Of Hours Service Contract has been successfully implemented with Mears. This enables residents to report issues out of normal office hours with the vast majority relating to Housing Repairs.

11 The furlough scheme ending could cause uncertainty for many residents and so to support we are launching a virtual hub via the EFDC website. Marketed with the hashtag #BackOnYour Feet, it will navigate customers to existing services and partnership organisations that may be able to help them including housing, financial support, benefits, job-seeking, employability, mental health & well-being as well as partnerships such as Healthy Minds, New City College, Jobcentre Plus, Reed.co.uk, Epping Forest Foodbank & Frontline. The sentiment is to let our residents know that we care about them and are here to support through difficult times. We're expecting a lot of younger working people to be impacted and as such will have a strong social media presence to support.

12 Our three microsites; North Weald Airfield, Waltham Abbey Museum and Countrycare are now up and running. Further specific information will continue to be added to the sites by the relevant areas to reflect the current restrictions with Covid-19. The links to the microsites are:

Countrycare <https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/countrycare/>

Epping Forest District Museum <https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/museum/>

North Weald Airfield <https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/northweald/>

13 Q2 performance key points to note are; 71% overall customer satisfaction (target 80%), 50% first point resolution (target of 45%), 98% of complaints resolved within SLA (10 working days). The contact centre is almost fully resourced with two further Officers joining shortly. With a full headcount and training completed we would hope to see overall customer satisfaction increasing.

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