

# ***Report to the Council***

**Committee:** Cabinet

**Date:** 30 July 2020

**Subject:** Customer and Corporate Support Services Portfolio

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor Sam Kane

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## **Recommending:**

**That the report of the Customer and Corporate Support Services Portfolio Holder be noted.**

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1 The period since my last report to Council has been dominated by the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown and the current response as we move into the recovery phase, particularly around the local economy. The Customer Directorate has been central to the Covid response at each stage.

### Revenues and Benefits

2 At the early stages of the lockdown the Government has a clear focus around supporting businesses and employment. One of the key strands of this support was an increase in Small Business Rate Relief which left a large number of businesses with no rates to pay for 2020/21. The Revenues team applied this uplift and the increased relief is worth £14m to local small businesses. In addition, as Members are aware that the Government created a Retail, Leisure and Hospitality Grant Fund which was worth £29m to qualifying businesses. This was quickly provided to local businesses through the combined efforts of the Revenues team and others with over 90% being distributed within 2 weeks which was one of the fastest rates of provision in the Eastern region. Following on from the initial Grant allocations a further £1.5m was provided for those businesses that have not thus far received any financial support under other schemes, including those in shared office premises for example. The requirement was for a local scheme to be created and this was approved by Cabinet last month and the Revenues team is processing these applications at the time of writing.

3 The Government has also made a number of changes to Benefits applications, including uplifts in the Local Housing Allowance. As Members may appreciate the downturn in the economy has led to an increase in unemployment, although many will claimants will move straight onto Universal Credit, with unfortunately many experiencing unemployment for the first time. It has however led to an increase in Local Council Tax Support claims and also a net increase in Housing Benefit claims. However, in spite of this and through process improvements the turnaround in Benefit claims has fallen from 16 days to 12 days. However, the demands on the Benefits team and their ability to maintain performance will be kept under review as the Government's furlough scheme ends in October which may be accompanied by a spike in unemployment.

4 In common with all local authorities, the income streams of Councils have been severely affected by the Covid-19 lockdown and the collection of Council Tax and Business

Rates is no exception. At the end of June the comparative collection figure to the same stage last year were:

Council Tax                    25.3% (2020/21)            27.22% (2019/20)

Business Rates            20.7% (2020/21)            28.41% (2019/20)

5        There will clearly be collection problems ahead and a strategy for re-commencing debt collection this month has been created which reflects the particular issues facing businesses and individuals at this time, with a heavy focus on engagement and support for those in arrears at this time. This focus is based four key principles of being supportive, proportionate, inclusive and flexible. This has been laid out in further detail in the Covid recovery report to Cabinet on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2020.

### Customer Services

6        The Customer Services team has been central to the front-line response to the Covid response whether it be responding to increased customer enquiries through a variety of channels available or supporting Project Shield. The breadth of front-line knowledge required by the Customer Team to support the Covid response has grown proportionately with these new demands and the need to review processes to maximise resources. However, the Council has demonstrated its flexibility to re-direct resources to respond to changing demands with the Contact Centre team receiving additional resources from other area to assist with the Covid response and dedicated Covid Helpline for customers. This additional resource flexes up and down as the Covid demands on the team changes.

7        The Corporate Communications team has provided a crucial role in supporting the Council's Covid response particularly through the website and social media. This is an equally important support role as the Council seeks to re-build our local economy. The table below shows the increase in communications provided by the team over the Covid period:

#### **SOCIAL MEDIA**

Stat type	TWITTER			FACEBOOK			INSTAGRAM			LINKEDIN		
	2019	2020	Difference	2019	2020	Difference	2019	2020	Difference	2019	2020	Difference
Total followers	8.4K	9.1K	8.30%	2.9K	3.3K	11.8%	999	1.4K	44.3%	945	1.5K	59.8%
Posts	556	657	18.20%	530	548	3.6%	22	187	750.0%	64	277	333.0%
New followers	217	316	45.60%	195	299	53.3%	0	116		No statistic		
Messages	1.1K	1.6K	48.60%	522	828	58.6%	9	46	411.0%	4	29	625.0%
Likes	612	1.2K	26.10%	1.5K	2.6K	75.4%	292	1.2K	322.0%	182	712	291.0%
Engagements	1K	2.3K	126%	5.3K	7.3K	38.0%	301	1.3K	331.0%	205	824	302.0%

NB. 1 March 2019 - 16 July 2019 compared with 1 March 2020 - 16 July 2020

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

INTRANET			
STAT type/date	2019	2020	Difference
New intranet pages created	0	8	
New intranet page traffic	0	1864	
Intranet news articles created	12	108	800.0%
Intranet news article traffic	506	4111	

ALL EMPLOYEE EMAIL			
STAT type/date	2019	2020	Difference
Total emails sent	66	153	131.8%
Total emails received		159	

NB. 1 March 2019 - 16 July 2019 compared with 1 March 2020 - 16 July 2020

	Data unavailable
	Increase
	Decrease

### Website

During 1 March to 16 July 2020 there were **290,000 visits** to the Epping Forest District Council website. A new and improved website was **launched in February** and together with new EU GDPR cookie rules stating users must actively consent to being tracked, the number of visits has gone down from 399,000 compared to the same period last year.

Since March, **4 new sections of 20 pages**, branded to show the Stay Alert message and the Stay at Home messages, have been created specifically with information relating the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. **65 coronavirus related news releases** have been published. These pages have had **11,000 page views**.

### Webcasting

The last webcast from the council chamber was on 18 March for DDMC. Virtual webcasts using Zoom started with cabinet on 15 April.

**19 virtual public meetings and 1 virtual staff briefing** have been broadcast since March. This does not include training sessions for councillors and officers to practice the new processes to allow for the continuation of the democratic process. The Public-i webcast system has been successfully integrated with both MS Teams and Zoom, and we are working with Public-i on a hybrid system to integrate live and virtual meetings.

Our virtual webcasts have had **10,927 views and 52,025 visits** – the Top 3 virtual webcasts are:

1. Employee briefing on 13 May has most hits with 5,701 views including 360 live
2. Cabinet on 15 April has 402 views including 39 live
3. Cabinet on 11 June has 317 views including 29 live.

The licensing sub-committee had its first ever webcast on 7 July, virtually of course.

8 The Payment Solutions team has had to support customer who have been unable to pay by cash. This has led to resources helping customers transition to digital payments. Officers have been contacting traditional cash payers directly and have been successful on over 60% of contacts of achieving that digital transition. The team are looking at new ways to see how further support can be provided going forward.

## Democratic and Electoral Services

9 At the commencement of the Covid lockdown face-to-face Council meetings were cancelled in line with Government advice. There was the need however for the Council to continue with democratic process and the Democratic Services team worked in conjunction with Members, Senior Management and the Corporate Communications and ICT teams to deliver committee meetings by Zoom. This has been a success and a critical stepping-stone for local democracy before we move back to physical meetings in the future.

10 Whilst the local elections for May 2021 were cancelled the Elections Team have been busy with the transition to the new requirements for the 2020 electoral canvass. Data matching has been underway for this year's exercise and the changes for 2020 have necessitated stationary changes and also some more nudges to paperless returns including the absence of a pre-paid envelope. In addition, for 2020 households with no changes since their last return will not have report 'no change'. This will help reduce the overall paper management and administration during the canvass process.

11 Preparations for the 2021 Census are underway nationally and officers will bring a report to Members when the local arrangements and timetable have become clear. The Council's Local Census Liaison Manager is Rob Pavey and the Assistant Local Census Liaison Manager is Gary Woodhall.