

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet
Date: 17 December 2020
Subject: Customer and Corporate Support Services Portfolio
Portfolio Holder: Councillor Sam Kane

Recommending:

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

1 The Customer Directorate has again been heavily involved in the Covid response, particularly within the Revenues and Corporate Communications teams.

Revenues and Benefits

2 The Revenues team has been implementing a new phase of the Government grants covering the period when the EFDC area was subject to Tier 2 restrictions, during the latest lockdown

- **Local Restrictions (Closed) Grant** – this grant relates to the businesses that have been forced to close during the current lockdown. This scheme is worth around £2m.
- **Local Restrictions (Open) Grant** – this grant relates to the period when authorities are placed in either Tier 2 or Tier 3 Covid restrictions and certain businesses are impacted by this. The scheme relates to leisure, hospitality, hotel and bed and breakfast establishments. A grant payment is made for each 28-day period an authority is in the Tier 2 or 3 situation. For every For EFDC the grant applied to the 19 days we were in Tier 2 prior to the lockdown and the grant levels are apportioned to the number of days involved. it also covers all subsequent periods post=lockdown
- **Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG)** – this is the ‘Discretionary’ scheme that applies to businesses that had not been forced to close but were severely impacted by the effects of the lockdown. Working with Economic Development a list of priority areas for award were developed and a policy created. This also incorporated elements of the last Discretionary scheme for those who had fell the through the net before. There has been £2.6m available for tis scheme.
- **Business Adaption Grant (BAG)** – this scheme relates to grants for businesses who want to make adaptations, buy equipment etc to cope with the Covid environment. There was £2.2m provided to ECC and they are providing funds to districts to administer the scheme locally, based on a

common policy which is attached. There is £242,000 available for EFDC on a first come first served basis.

Further information on all the schemes is available on the Council's website.

3 The Government's Test and Trace payment scheme has been in place for a few months 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. The team have administered and paid around 100 of these applications thus far. Full details are available on the Council's website.

4 Caseload numbers for Housing Benefit and Local Council Tax Support remain fairly stable, likely due to the extension to the Furlough scheme to the end of the financial year, which will delay rises in unemployment. New claims during Q3 are being processed in 9.56 days compared to 11.07 days in Q2. In terms of channel shift, I am pleased to report that 84% of new claims that the Council processes are now made on-line compared with 50% at the start of the financial year.

5 The team continues to pursue outstanding debts for Council Tax, Business Rates, Sundry Debts and Housing Benefit Overpayments. A further 1,500 reminder notices have been sent making a total of 5,500 since recovery action recommenced in September.

Customer Services

6 The Customer Services team was central to the front-line response to the first wave of Covid lockdown. The service has welcomed two new Officers and are currently recruiting for a new Complaints Officer which will see the team fully resourced. Further coaching and support on the complaints process will be rolled out in Q4 to those Managers identified as needing it.

7 To ensure we are providing the right service to meet our customer demand we are currently collating data for customer call patterns to identify opportunities for improvement.

8 The second day's training pilot of 'Customer Shoes' training will be held 2nd December. The trainers have been provided with real-life scenarios for dealing with difficult customers, these will be role modelled and practised in the session. The next stage will be videos using these scenarios available via a customer shoes hub for all staff access.

9 Work has started to rejuvenate the Digital Buddies programme. In conjunction with VAEF we are looking at support options for the 2021 Digital Census and in addition linking up with the CCW team to offer digital support for residents as an output of the feedback received from their doorstep activity challenge visits.

10 Feedback received from Members regarding their iPads and alternative options is being discussed with ICT colleagues to agree a way forward. A working group was set up to discuss challenges with the Members Contact process, it's been agreed that all new contact will come via the existing channel, medium term the Members Contact form will be simplified and long term the content will be available on the Councillors Portal.

11 Looking forward, we will be developing a Customer Shoes hub providing access to 'all things' customer for staff and Managers. A link to the content will be

included in new starters onboarding to ensure all staff live and breathe the customer shoes culture from day one.

12 During Customer Service week we engaged with cash paying customers at the Broadway to identify why they pay cash. Two thirds said they felt fully informed of the alternatives but over half did not feel confident or competent in using them, relying on the assurance of face to face support. Many did not have bank accounts or were carers making a payment on behalf of someone. The cash office remains open Mondays/Tuesdays 10 am to 2pm, Waltham Abbey library is expected to open 4th December providing access to the kiosks.

13 Cover has been arranged with Mears our Out of Hours provider for the Christmas & New Year closure period, customer expectations will be managed with a communication confirming it will be an out of hours only service provided on these days.

14 Q3 performance key points to date are: 74% overall customer satisfaction vs 71% at Q2, (target 80%), 49% first point resolution (target of 45%), 79% of complaints resolved within SLA (10 working days). For October 42 complaints received, this almost equals the amount received for entire Q2. Complaints to Housing Repairs has seen a significant increase. Root cause analysis and discussions with Qualis will take place.

15 With Epping having one of the highest Covid-19 infection rates in the County. Our Communications team are continuing to operate in crisis mode with communications across all platforms being delivered in partnership with ECC and Public Health England.