

Report to the Council

Committee: **Council**

Date: **25 February 2021**

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

Portfolio Holder: **Councillor Sam Kane**

Recommending:

That the report of the Customer 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, with the support of Business Support staff, continue to implement and process business support grants being made available by Central Government and the county; now covering the periods when the EFDC area has been subject to Tier 2, 3, 4 and National restrictions, due to the latest lockdown.

The aim of the team is to make grant payments as quickly as possible to struggling businesses and the grants process is absorbing a large amount of resource for the Revenues, Benefits and Business Support teams due to its complexity and the number and range of grants available and this not be underestimated. This is an additional burden which has been absorbed through the re-prioritisation of tasks but the duration of the grants process, now reaching a year has an inevitable impact on 'business as usual' work which is continually being risk-assessed to minimise any impact. The organisation has a process to redeploy resources to pinch points of work but the effect of the general Covid situation makes this challenging. The team is now entering a period of year-end processing including annual Council Tax and Business Rates billing along with Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support awards as we await the Government's next phase of the Covid response and demands on the team and authority generally.

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

3 The Government's Test and Trace payment scheme has been in place since October, 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. Full details are available on the Council's website. So far, we have received over 750 applications, of which we have around 300 still in process. We have paid out over £100,000.

Further information on the Test & Trace Support Payment scheme is available on the Council's website.

4 Caseload numbers for Housing Benefit and Local Council Tax Support remain 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 over 95% of new claims that the Council processes are now made on-line compared with 50% at the start of the financial year. We are also now carrying out over 90% of Housing Benefit and Local Council Tax Support reviews on-line.

5 Despite the challenges presented by working in a Covid-19 dominated environment, the team continues to pursue outstanding debts for Council Tax, Business Rates, Sundry Debts, Former Tenant Arrears and Housing Benefit Overpayments. We will be introducing a new Sundry Debtors system during the coming weeks.

Customer Services

6 The Customer Services team has successfully recruited a new Complaints & Satisfaction Officer who will be joining in March. Recruitment will shortly commence for a new Payment Solutions Team Manager as the current Manager is taking retirement. In addition, the Payments team has recently lost specialised technical support and a review of roles and accountabilities is taking place in conjunction with ICT to address the skills gap and risk.

7 The next phase of our customer strategy roadmap is underway. Analysis of why our customers contact us and how will help us to identify quick wins and demands that need to be addressed. Customer personas will be developed and used to help us reach out and engage our customer groups. We will be sharing proposals on potential improvements that could be made by each contact channel with customers for feedback. Examples of this could be the option to receive a call back when contacting us or to know where you are in the queue when holding on, in addition we are exploring new technology options such as live chat.

8 The first three 'Customer Shoes' behavioural training videos will be launched via our customer shoes knowledge hub towards the end of quarter four/early quarter one.

9 Our Digital Buddies programme of work is unfortunately on hold as residents have fed back that they do not wish to have this coaching virtually. In conjunction with VAEF we have set up support for the 2021 Digital Census and VAEF volunteers will be on hand to support residents with completion. These locations will be Oakwood Hill Community Centre on Mondays throughout March and April from 9.30am-3.30pm. Tuesdays throughout March and April at Waltham Abbey Leisure Centre and Fridays throughout march at Ongar Leisure Centre.

10 A number of technology issues raised by Members such as Mod.Gov calendar integration and not being able to open documents in Outlook are currently being worked on by ICT. The Team Manager is holding regular updates with ICT and working in conjunction with those Members effected to resolve all issues in a timely manner.

11 Quarter 3 contact centre performance key messages: 71% overall customer satisfaction (target 80%) key frustrations were for missed waste collections especially during the Christmas period due to a scheduling issues with Biffa. 90% complaints

resolved in 10 working days (target 85%), examples of complaints received were of noise issues taking longer to resolve as not being able to access residents' properties during restrictions and delays with repairs due to supplier challenges. First point resolution 47% (target 45%), highest proportion of transfers to Qualis.

12 Our Communications team are continuing to work collaboratively in partnership with ECC and Public Health England for Covid-19 as we move towards recovery phase as the vaccination programme is rolled out. For Brexit, our website is directing customer enquiries to HMRC, levels of traffic have been relatively light in the first few weeks since the opening of the inland border facility.