

# ***Report to the Council***

**Committee:** Cabinet **Date:** 29 April 2021  
**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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## Revenues and Benefits

1 Grants being made available by Central Government and the County; covering the periods when the EFDC area has been subject to Tier 2, 3, 4, National Lockdown Restrictions and the latest Re-Start Grants, for which they have received around 300 applications since 1 April. In all, the team has paid out over £13million since last November, making a total of £45million in support grants paid to local businesses over the past year.

The grants process, now surpassing a year, is having an inevitable impact on 'business as usual' work, which is continually being risk-assessed to minimise the impact. In particular, these on-going demands, if not managed with sufficient support, could present a financial risk to the council and precepting authorities should this impact council tax and business rates administration and collection. There is also a further targeted business support grant scheme on the horizon following the Government's recent announcement to commit an additional £1.5bn to help many more businesses that have suffered as a result of the pandemic.

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

The Revs & Bens team has now entered a new financial year and the result of annual billing always produces peaks in workloads, which is compounded by the onset of new periods of recovery of both Council Tax and Business Rates.

2 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. From March, this was extended to parents and guardians of infants and children required to stay at home upon the instruction of their childcare provider or school. Successful applicants receive a £500 payment. Full details are available on the Council's website. So far, we have processed around 900 applications and have paid out over £160,000.

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

3 Caseload numbers for Housing Benefit and Local Council Tax Support remain stable, likely due to the extension to the Furlough scheme, which will delay rises in

unemployment. During 2020/21, new claims were being processed on average within 11.3 days compared to 12.5 days the previous year; amendments within 4.5 days compared to 6 days previously. In terms of channel shift, I am pleased to report that over the past 12 months approximately 85% of new claims that the team processed were made on-line compared with less than 50% during the previous financial year. They are also now carrying out over 90% of Housing Benefit and Local Council Tax Support reviews on-line.

4 Despite the challenges presented by working in a Covid-19 dominated environment, the Revs & Bens team handled 75,000 customer phone calls during the past financial year; the team continues to pursue outstanding debts for Council Tax, Business Rates, Sundry Debts, Former Tenant Arrears and Housing Benefit Overpayments. The service also takes part in a Pan Essex data matching initiative through which Epping Forest has been top of the savings leader board for past 12 months consecutively, having saved the council over £65k in erroneous claims - the work is ongoing

### Customer Services

5 With the retirement of our Payment Solutions Team Manager at the end of May we have successfully recruited an internal replacement Manager joining on 12<sup>th</sup> April giving time for an extensive handover.

6 Last year our strategy focussed on fixing the basics and introducing a customer shoes culture. Bridging the gap between us, customers and our colleagues in other service areas remains key. We will continue to drive one point of contact through the transition of remaining service areas 'customer' function into the contact centre.

In summary our strategy this year will cover;

- Gaining a better understanding of our customers and their needs
- How they contact us and why
- Utilising modern technology to enhance the customer contact experience
- Service delivery improvements
- Customer shoes cultural training
- Digital buddies support for residents

Note. Resourcing is still an issue and a resolution is currently being worked to enable us to fully deliver our service plan. The priorities will be the launch of our new welcome lounge and partnership hub, continued service delivery improvements plus transition of the remaining service areas customer contact into the Customer Contact Centre.

7 In readiness for the re-opening of the Civic Office we are working with partners joining us in the Community Hub to understand their requirements, process map the customer journey and ensure our partners needs are fully supported.

For the Welcome Lounge, our Receptionists/Floor Walkers will be smartly dressed in a uniform of a white shirt and navy bottoms plus a 'Here to Help' lanyard so that they are easily recognised by visitors. Our new Visitor Management kiosks will be in place for the building re-opening. Phase 1 will enable customers to self-check in and alert Officers to their arrival (this is for customers with pre booked appointments) those without will be assisted by our welcome team. Officers will also be able to book

meetings and interview rooms. The next stage planned for Quarter 2/3 will see customers able to book venues themselves such as the Limes Centre.

8 May will see the first 'Customer Shoes' webinar training launched up to a maximum of forty employees, dates are currently being agreed. Our Service Superstars initiative launched as a quarterly event. Daniel Ragen, Business Support Officer was Q4's Service Superstar, he was nominated for his excellent customer service. In particular he was recognised for his work in Local Land Charges, supporting the delivery of a new electronic process that allowed the team to work from home without accessing paper files. Improving efficiency and level of service to customers.

9 The Broadway Cash office will re-open on 12<sup>th</sup> April enabling those customers who are reliant on cash to make payments. The payment kiosk at Waltham Abbey library will re-open on 12<sup>th</sup> April and the kiosk at the Civic with the building re-opening on 21<sup>st</sup> June once the building has been fitted out for EFDC occupation and made Covid safe for external customers. We have been looking at long term solutions for cash paying customers and a report on this will follow in due course.

10 In conjunction with VAEF we set up support for the 2021 Digital Census and VAEF volunteers have been on hand to support residents with completion. As a reminder, locations where Oakwood Hill Community Centre on Mondays throughout April from 9.30am-3.30pm and Tuesdays throughout April at Waltham Abbey Leisure Centre.

11 Feedback was captured from Members and Officers on the use of the Members Contact process. Short term the decision has been made that all new Members enquiries are to be raised via Members Contact. Once Members are in discussion with Officers the conversation will continue on a one to one basis with confirmation back to Members Contact once a query has been resolved. Longer term this process will feed into the development of the Members Portal.

As for ICT issues, we are publishing a weekly reminder of the agreed process in the Members bulletin which is for Members to call the ICT helpdesk directly or if easier to email Members Contact who will raise on their behalf. Customer services are receiving a daily live update of open IT issues and ensuring pro-active speedy resolutions.

We are pro-actively contacting Members to identify and address ICT issues or concerns plus check their level of digital adoption. A working group has been set up and recommendations will be provided in due course. This will also allow us to plan appropriate training on the right topics and in the right format.

A review of Members induction process is also taking place to look at how equipment is issued and returned to improve efficiency of this process. In addition, the Induction pack is being reviewed to ensure it is fit for purpose and Members are aware of their IT responsibilities.

12 Quarter 4 contact centre performance key messages: 74% overall customer satisfaction (target 80%) 82% complaints resolved in 10 working days (target 85%), significant increase for Revenues due to grant applications declined and business owners expressing dissatisfaction via the complaints process. A number of complaints were received due to the time taken for housing repair works to be

completed, Assets and Qualis are working together to complete repairs in a timely manner and resolve complaints

First point resolution 44% (target 45%). The customer contact centre has been supporting Revenue and Benefits with an overflow of calls concerning business grants, Council Tax reminders and year end billing hence our highest call volume into the contact centre this year (see stats below). These queries would attribute to the slight reduction in first point resolution as some residents required further information from the Revenue & Benefits team.

Overall for 20/21 our first point resolution has increased from an average of 38% to 47%. The automated scripts developed for customer online self-serve forms are also used by our Officers to assist them in resolving at first point of contact.