

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet
Date: 28 October 2021
Subject: Customer and Partnerships Portfolio
Portfolio Holder: Councillor Sam Kane

Recommending:

That the report of the Customer and Partnerships Portfolio Holder be noted.

1 Revenues and Benefits

- The Revenues and Benefits team continue to provide a daily frontline presence at the Civic Offices, as they have done since re-opening in June of this year. In addition, the team provide expert advice as part of the work being carried out by the Community Hub.
- The Revs and Bens team continue to process the business support grants currently being made available by Central Government and the County council. Further information on all business support schemes, as well as the application forms, is available on the council website.
- The Revs and Bens team continue to provide support for families through the Government's Test and Trace Support Payment scheme, which has now been in place since October last year. In addition, the team also administers the County council scheme, which is less prescriptive than that of Central Government. Further information on these schemes, as well as the application forms, is available on the council website.
- Housing Benefit and Local Council Tax Support caseload numbers continue to remain stable; however, it is too early to gauge the effects of the ending of the Government's Furlough Scheme, which came to an end 30 September 2021.
- The end of furlough and the £20per week uplift in Universal Credit will likely result in customers experiencing financial difficulties. The Revs and Bens team can make online referrals for a food parcels from the Epping Forest Foodbank Project. These food parcels contain at least 3 days' worth of nutritionally balanced food, with a minimum of 10 meals for the household; as well as household essentials, toiletries, sanitary products, pet food where requested and can even take account of dietary requirements. The foodbanks are available at the following places:

- In Debden at St John's on the Broadway, 66 The Broadway, Debden on Saturday for collection 10.30-12noon
- In Epping at Civic Offices Community Hub on Monday 3.30-5pm. Food parcels can be prepared then and collected by arrangement
- In Loughton at St Mary's Church, High Road Loughton on Wednesday 10-12noon
- In Ongar at St Martin's Church Rooms, Castle Street, Chipping Ongar on Thursday 10-11.30

Deliveries can be arranged for people unable to get to a centre via the e-referral website - <https://eppingforest.foodbank.org.uk/>

- During the second quarter the Revs and Bens team have issued over 6,500 reminders and final notices, which has further resulted in the issuing of approximately 600 summonses in respect of unpaid Business Rates and 3,000 summonses in respect of unpaid Council Tax. This is almost double in numbers from that of previous years. This has proved to be a challenging and stressful time for the staff and created an enormous amount of work for the team; however, the council and precepting authorities are reaping the rewards from this:

- Business Rates collection end of Q2 2021/22 - 46.80%
- Business Rates collection end of Q2 2020/21 - 44.91%
- Business Rates collection end of Q2 2019/20 - 53.78%

- The collection rate for the current year is skewed as a result of the Government's relief granted for the months of April, May and June. There are signs that we are reducing the gap each month between the current year and 2019/20, which is a more realistic yardstick against which to measure performance than last year. The current Business Rates collectable debit is £30,342,753.

- Council Tax collection end of Q2 2021/22 - 51.56%
- Council Tax collection end of Q2 2020/21 - 50.37%
- Council Tax collection end of Q2 2019/20 - 52.14%

- Bearing in mind the current economic climate, to be less than 0.6% down on the collection rate for 2019/20 is testament to the work of the team and other support services. The current Council Tax collectable debit is £102,961,445.

2 Customer Services

Welcome Lounge Launch

- Our Welcome Lounge launched to the public on 19th July, after a slow start we are seeing an average footfall of 90 visitors a week (in comparison to an average of 300 pre-Covid). Visits are mainly for Housing and Revenue and Benefits. Visitors requesting recycling sacks have been more than happy when advised of all the local outlets around the District to collect sacks.

Community Hub Launch

- Our Community Hub opened 13th September following familiarisation tours for Partners. As a reminder partners who joined us include Food Bank, Phoenix Futures, Nacro, VAEF, ECC Family Solutions, DWP, CAB, CHES Homeless, Changing Pathways and Peabody. Whilst initial footfall has been slow, we are ramping up our marketing campaign including posters and communications out to all Town and Parish Councils plus our partner from VAEF is looking into advertisement via his session on Essex Radio station. The aligning service areas are in attendance in the Hub on the same days/times as partners providing a one stop multi agency approach for our residents.

Cash Payments

- The cash office continues to see steady usage since reopening on 12th April, with over a thousand unique customers and £660,000 income, of which nearly £320,000 has been cash. The kiosk at Waltham abbey has taken £182,000 in total of which £100,000 was cash. The kiosks at Epping Civic offices reopened on 21 July, taking £34,000 total of which £16,000 was cash.
- In June we launched a touch tone telephone payment service to replace our end of life voice recognition system. This replacement has resulted in a significant increase in the number of successful automated payments, with far fewer customers struggling to use the system and requests for additional Officer support down by approximately 70%.
- With regards to the paper on the future options for cash paying customers, final analysis is being completed prior to the publication of this report. This is expected towards the end of October.

Customer Strategy Update

In Your Shoes' customer service behavioural training

- The last planned seminar will be held on 13th September with thirty colleagues attending the training session run by the training provider the Impact Factory. Experienced Officers and Managers attended to hold a Q&A session and experience share how they deal with very difficult and challenging customer conversations. Colleague feedback on the session scored an overall nine out of ten in terms of usefulness and value add from the training. The intention is to provide an edited version of this recording and launch to all staff in the coming months. This is module one of three in place to support colleagues with challenging conversations. Module two focusses on telephone aggression and module three conflict management.

First Line Migration to the Customer Contact Centre

- Revenue and Benefits first line contact was due to transition quarter 3 this year however due to capacity issues this transition has moved back to quarter 3 2022/23. The final five percent transition for Community Culture and Wellbeing is dependent on the automation of the venue hire bookings platform. This automation will be incorporated into an ICT project to develop a

corporate system for all booking systems. In the meantime, the venue hire bookings process remains a manual process enabling our customers to continue to book room hire.

Multi-Channel Digital Platform

- Our customer call centre faces the challenge of having to use nine different applications to access information to serve our customers. We are investigating potential suppliers for a multi-channel customer engagement platform which will provide our residents with the ability to interact with us via live chat, artificial intelligence, telephone and email as well as self-serve via our website.

Customer Service Failures

- Whilst the above digital platform project has been on hold due to capacity it's now recognised that the requirements need to be broadened. We are receiving feedback that there is dissatisfaction with either a delay or lack of response from some technical service areas to customer queries and calls. We currently do not have any way of tracking our end to end customer journey for queries not resolved by the customer contact centre to identify service failures. In addition to a new telephony system we will be investigating a case management system providing a single view of the customer. A collaborative approach with ICT and other service areas will ensure that all new systems introduced across EFDC are fully integrated.
- In the interim, Members, Parish and Town Councillors have been invited to provide feedback on specific examples of customer service failures for investigation, root cause and service improvements to be made.

Customer Contact Centre Performance

- Our overall service has been impacted by significant resourcing challenges, this is due to long term sickness, bereavement and leavers. Officer vacancies are being filled and we continue our campaign to recruit to our Team Manager vacancy for Members and Delivery Solutions. A receptionist is also being appointed on a three months fixed term contract to alleviate the pressure of the Contact Centre Officers covering reception duties in the Welcome Lounge.
- Our overall customer satisfaction for quarter 2 was 58% (target 80%). Our residents are unhappy with the wait times due to the resourcing issues as well as not being able to get through to our technical teams. As previously mentioned, this is being investigated and we encourage ongoing specific feedback.
- We resolved 88% complaints within 10 working days (target 85%). Quarter 2 has seen a 33% increase on complaints, with an increase for Revenues due to grants, final demands and summons. Community and Resilience has also seen an uplift due to noise complaints.
- Whilst our customer contact centre has been hit by resourcing issues, the remaining team are still doing very well in terms of resolving queries at first

point of contact achieving 62% first point resolution (target 45%). This is a 13% increase on the previous quarter.

Digital Community News Platform

- September saw the launch of our digital online community news application District Matters, which draws on a range of local third-party content providers in support of news items reproduced from the EFDC website and social media. Evaluation and modifications are planned for January 2022
<https://paper.li/District-Matters>

New Web Page for Members

- We have developed a new web page for Members in the absence of a Members Portal which gives you access to everything you need in the one place. This link can be found on the front page of our website, at the bottom under 'Contact Us'.

<https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/your-council/members-portal/>

Simplified Member Contact Form

- We have simplified the Member Contact Form used to log enquiries. Changes include shortened and simplified questions when logging an enquiry, the option to view the enquiries you logged via the 'My Requests' tab and the option to log a new enquiry immediately after submitting one. By logging your enquiry using the Member Contact Form, we can monitor the progress of your enquiry and ensure you receive a timely response. If you need assistance using the form, please get in touch with the Member Contact Team.

http://eppingforestdc-self.achieveservice.com/service/Member_Contact

Local Government Signposting

- Following feedback received we have developed a 'who does what' page on our website to give clarity on our local government structure as Members and Residents told us that it's not always easy to know which Council to contact. The link can be found under 'Your Council'

<https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/your-council/local-government-structure-in-essex/>

3 Car Parking

- Works are progressing for Electrical Vehicle (EV) charging in Oakwood Hill East Car Park. Lease negotiations are currently taking place between EFDC and InstaVolt and EFDC have successfully negotiated reducing the length of the lease from 20 years to 15 years. InstaVolt and EFDC are working towards installing rapid chargers at Oakwood Hill East by Christmas this year.
- The overall parking income levels are on average 75% of pre-pandemic income figures since restrictions have been lifted. Whilst short stay car parks

are reaching pre-pandemic income levels, long stay commuter car parks are still affected as people are predominantly working from home. The Car Parking Team are monitoring current income levels against pre-pandemic income levels per car park.

- The Car Parking Team are conducting a review of the off-street car park tariffs and a Parking Consultant has been appointed to explore possible tariff recommendations. All recommendations will be discussed with Members and Sustainable Transport/ Climate Change/ Economic Development teams.

4 ICT

Service Management

- Service management continues to be a focus for the team. The number of incidents and requests continues to be high, particularly on a Monday. All tickets are managed through the on line HOTH system. There is some concern that the number of tickets being closed is online the number being opened, but it is expected that this will resolve itself once the team is fully up to speed.
- The current SLAs for tickets are being closely managed, and the daily stand up process helps to provide focus on this. Customers will be contacted if tickets are due to breach and new dates agreed.
- The problem management process is being used more extensively to investigate the underlying issues. Rather than just fixing the symptoms (via tickets) , problem records are used to delve further and get to the route cause of issues. This is expected to reduce overall call volumes going forward and improve customer satisfaction.
- Customer satisfaction for tickets in September is shown below

Sept Feedback	Customer service	Technical Skill	Ticket Handling	Time taken
Very Satisfied	88%	86%	86%	84%
Satisfied	12%	14%	14%	14%

Projects

- The project governance process is in full flow and an increasing number of projects require ICT input. Where there are bottle necks, such as with Granicus forms, priority lists are agreed with business areas, or, if funding is available, external resource is used to assist.
- There are several large business projects in flight, such as digital planning, housing and efinancials upgrade. These are consuming large amounts of the teams' time, and in some cases external resource will be used to provide the additional support required.
- There are a significant number of infrastructure projects in flight. This is to modernise the current environment and get things ready for the move to Azure.
- The continued flexible working model is putting the team under increased pressure to provide support and services to a large number of locations, and

individuals. Projects are being explored to help simplify this, such as improving the remote management of software, and the use of auto pilot services for building laptops.

Strategy

- The ICT strategy paper is complete and covers the work the team need to focus on to deliver against the council's objectives. This is being used now to plan out the projects that need to be done over the next few years. The move to Software as a Service for many business applications, and Microsoft Azure cloud, for those services left, are key to this.

Accommodation Project

- The accommodation project has now formally closed. The ICT team are now supporting the technical elements of the implementation, supported by third parties for elements such as the AV and booking system.

ICT Team

- Christine Ferrigi has returning from maternity leave and will resume her role as Service Manager for Business Support and ICT. Maryvonne Hassall will continue to provide support.
- Changes have been made to the service desk team to modify 2 roles to provide second line support (rather than just first line). This is expected to reduce the number of tickets needing to be passed on to third line teams. It is also expected to assist the mobile team by providing alternative resources. The new team members will take a while to get fully up to speed as they learn the EFDC systems and processes.
- The 'shift left' principle is being used across the whole team to try to get the work to the right person in the team and resolve issues at the earliest (and cheapest) occasion.
- A vacancy has opened in the business application team, and this is being filled temporarily with contract resource while the team manager decides what best skills the team now need to be filled.
- A vacancy is also open currently in the infrastructure team, and this too will be filled in the short term with temporary resource while the changing skill sets of the team are clarified.