

# ***Report to the Council***

**Committee:** Cabinet  
**Date:** 24 February 2021  
**Subject:** Customer and Partnerships Portfolio  
**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor Sam Kane

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## **Recommending:**

**That the report of the Customer Portfolio Holder be noted.**

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## **1 Revenues and Benefits**

- The Revenues & 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 Civic Office Community Hub.
- The Revs & Bens team continue to process and support local businesses through the latest phase of support grants and reliefs announced by Central Government in December. Further information on all business support schemes, reliefs and reductions, as well as the application forms, is available on the council website:  
<https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/business/business-support-grants/>
- The Revs & Bens team continue to provide support for families through the Government's Test & Trace Support Payment scheme, which has now been in place since October 2020. In addition, the team also administers the County Council scheme, which is less prescriptive than that of Central Government. The team experienced a significant spike in applications in December and January as a result of the Omicron variant of Covid-19, processing over 150 support payments. Further information on these schemes, as well as the application forms, is available on the council website:  
<https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/benefits/test-and-trace-support-payment/>
- In the calendar year 2021, the Revs & Bens team received over 69,000 phone calls from customers, with a loss of just 3% due to abandoned calls, whilst answering over 90% within the call answer target.
- Housing Benefit and Local Council Tax Support caseload numbers continue to remain stable. The Q3 claim assessment times were:
  - New Claims – 10.5 days (down from 12 days in Q2)
  - Changes in circumstance – 8.5 days (down from 9 days in Q2)
- The increased level of performance is, in part due to the digital transformation and automation of DWP's ATLAS files and Universal Credit Data Share

(UCDS) files, which were reported on in the October Portfolio Holder report. As part of the Service Plan requirements, we intend to look at further automation in Q1 of 2022-23.

- During the third quarter the Revs & Bens team have issued over 2,000 reminders and final notices, which has further resulted in the issuing of approximately 1,000 summonses in respect of unpaid Business Rates and Council Tax. The continuing program of recovery is helping to increase revenue collection, but it should also be noted the Business Rates figures for the current year are skewed as a result of the Government's relief granted for the months of April, May and June 2021. There are signs however 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 £30,110,000. The current Council Tax collectable debit is £102,800,000
  - Business Rates collection end of Q3 2021/22 - 74.1%
  - Business Rates collection end of Q3 2020/21 - 71.4%
  - Business Rates collection end of Q3 2019/20 - 77.5%
  
  - Council Tax collection end of Q3 2021/22 - 76.6%
  - Council Tax collection end of Q3 2020/21 - 75.0%
  - Council Tax collection end of Q3 2019/20 - 77.6%

Bearing in mind the current economic climate and the effects of Covid-19, to be 1% down on the Council Tax collection rate from 2019/20 is testament to the work of the team and other support services.

## 2 Customer Services

- **Welcome Lounge**

The new branding for the Civic Hub was installed early December, as a reminder the branding guides our visitors to the four customer areas which are namely, the Community Hub, the Payment Kiosks, the Customer Lounge (waiting area/informal meetings) and the Customer Terminals. Visits to the Civic Hub remain mainly for face to face meetings with Housing and Revenue & Benefits.

Now that Regis are in place on the second floor, we are looking at external signage to guide both EFDC and Regis visitors from the carpark and into the building.

- **Community Hub Launch**

The Hub now has 19 different organisations (including Epping Forest District Council) offering their support and advice. Since opening in September, the hub has welcomed three new partner organisations. Employ-Ability who provide a number of services to help people with mental health issues find and maintain employment. Papworth Trust supporting those furthest from the employment market to gain employability skills including job searching, employment and education and training. The Alzheimer's Society who

provide support for people living with Dementia. The Hub has received great feedback and helped many people with various issues.

From September to December, we had a total of 206 visitors using the Hub partner services. Those receiving double-figure numbers of visitors were EFDC Homeless (82), Citizens Advice (35), DWP (30), Peabody (23), EFDC Revs & Bens (23) and Epping Forest Food Bank (22). To find out when each organisation is at the hub visit the [Epping Community Hub webpage](#)

We have seen a reduction in footfall from December onwards mainly due to Omnicron. An operational review is underway with partners to look at further ways of promoting the Hub to their customers.

- **Customer Contact Centre**

Lisa Bannister-Wood joined us on the 8<sup>th</sup> November, to manage half the contact centre as well as Members and Digital Inclusion. Lisa has a strong background in contact centre operations as well as service improvements. In addition, to alleviate the pressure of the Contact Centre Officers covering reception duties we appointed a temporary receptionist for the Welcome Lounge.

As previously advised, to align with our corporate reporting process, KPI's are reported to Stronger Council in line with quarterly timelines.

We are currently conducting a benchmarking exercise for our contact centre operating model in terms of resourcing, performance, systems and KPI's with other Local Authorities of a comparable size. Key messages from this exercise will be communicated in due course.

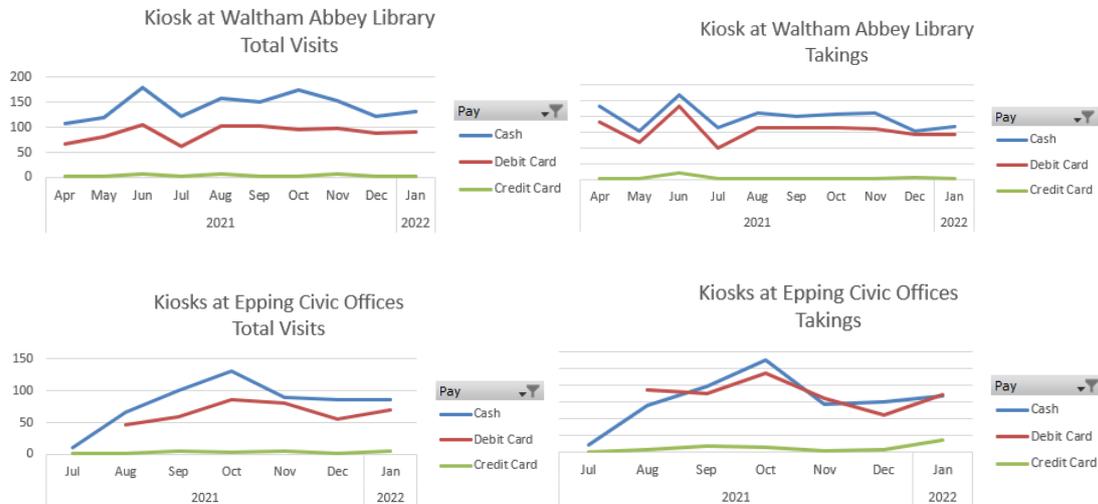
- **Cash Payments**

In November, the Debden Cash Office saw the highest customer visits (up 14.5%) and takings (up 19.5%) since reopening in April. This was likely due to increased debt collection, concerns about the possibility of a further Covid lockdown and the upcoming holiday season. Usage dropped considerably during December (partially related to closure over the Christmas period) and recovered slightly in January. Overall, for the 3-month period from Nov-Jan takings were down 3.3% and visits down 12.6% on the previous 3-month period.



Takings at Waltham Abbey Library kiosk remained consistent, with a slight fall of 2.2% over the 3-month period, though visitors were down 13%. Takings at the kiosks at Epping dropped sharply from a high in October by 23% for the 3-

month period, with visitors down 4%. Both sites are likely affected by the holiday season and Christmas closures.



Recommendations for alternative solutions for cash payers have now been finalised and the report will be presented at the Stronger Communities select committee in March

- **Customer Service Strategy - 2022/23 overview**

**Digital customer experience**

Our strategy for 2022/23 will focus on improving our online digital customer experience, with improvements to our website and online forms. We need digital to be the preferred choice for those customers who can interact in this way. This will enable us to free up Officer time for those vulnerable customers who do need to communicate with us via a phone call.

**The barriers to transacting by digital**

To help us identify the key barriers to communicating with us via digital we have been carrying out a manual call causation analysis exercise. Early stage key messages (using December 21 data) show that 26% of residents called us as they couldn't find the information on the website, with 23% chasing up non response to calls/emails, 19% didn't know they could self-serve, 17% had no access to the internet, 10% no digital skills and 5% found the online form too complicated. This data will inform and drive our improvements plans throughout 2022.

**Customer engagement**

Throughout February and March we are consulting with customers, Members and colleagues on our digital strategy via press releases, online surveys and focus groups. We are keen to understand how customers currently communicate with us, sharing with them the above barriers we have identified along with our plans to improve and hear their feedback which will help us to shape and finalise the strategy proposal.

## **Members digital journey**

For Members we are working on a one to one basis to identify and resolve any barriers to working in a digital manner with the May elections deadline to achieve this. Lisa is in contact with each Councillor to arrange sessions, if you do not yet have time booked in with Lisa please contact her via email to [L.BannisterWood@eppingforestdc.gov.uk](mailto:L.BannisterWood@eppingforestdc.gov.uk)

Please continue to raise tickets for any ICT issues so that we can address these as quickly as possible cc via [Membercontact@eppingforestdc.gov.uk](mailto:Membercontact@eppingforestdc.gov.uk)

## **Digital inclusion**

There is a strong appetite amongst partners and voluntary organisations to adopt a collaborative approach to digital inclusion and our role is to facilitate this working group. The group met in January to resume discussions, following the initial meeting last August, it was placed on hold due to lack of a Team Manager.

Clive Emmett from the West Essex Community Action Network (WECAN) described the challenge of how to reach those groups who struggle to access digital, kit, data, internet and training such as BAME groups and those with mental health issues.

The groups purpose will be to

- Connect, collaborate and identify how they can help each other
- Facilitate access to training, venues, hardware/devices
- Promote via our communication tools the support available to our residents
- Enable digitally excluded residents to access the support they need

WECAN have a programme of projects to support the use and uptake of digital technology. There are some great examples of how their projects can support our residents and we will be providing the team with nominations for the following;

- Access to six months Vodafone data for residents in need of data
- Wristbands for rough sleepers which will send alerts to their care worker if, for example, their temperature drops

The working group are meeting on a monthly basis to share updates and continue this work.

## **Corporate Communications including Digital News Platforms**

We soft-launched a new news platform branded District Matters towards the end of the last calendar year. Local users can subscribe to this news service which provides a mixture of council, stakeholder, partner and communities news items. Items are sourced from other content providers with a degree of automation, overseen by Corporate Comms. The system has stood up well technically as officers have developed experience. Initial subscription levels are low in comparison to other Council communications platforms. Having demonstrated the principle and technical delivery, Corporate Communications

is now developing promotional marketing materials to build the subscription base. Usage will be kept under review as marketing plans are implemented.

Our corporate communications team will be delivering the digital strategy customer engagement over February and March supported by the Customer Service Manager.

### 3 Parking

- The Car Parking Team are continuing to monitor current income levels against pre-pandemic income levels and income levels remain on average 75% of pre-pandemic income figures since restrictions have been lifted. Short stay car parks income levels are recovering well whereas long stay commuter car parks income levels remain affected as people are predominantly working from home.
- The annual North Essex Parking Partnership Traffic Regulation Order Application decision report was presented at the JCP meeting on 28 October 2021. The Epping on-street traffic regulation order schemes were all approved and are listed as follows:

<b>Name of Scheme</b>	<b>Type of Restriction</b>
Ormond Rise, Buckhurst Hill	Resident permit area/s
The Elms, Ongar	Waiting restriction/s
Brooklyn Avenue/Priory Road, Loughton	Waiting restriction/s
Lower Queens Road/Alfred Road/Cascade Road, Buckhurst Hill	Resident permit area/s
New Nazeing & associated roads, Nazeing	Waiting restriction/s
Mayflower Way, Ongar	Waiting restriction/s
Ravensmere, Epping	Resident Permit area
Baldwins Hill, Loughton	Resident permit area/s
The Drive, Loughton	Waiting restriction/s
St Nicholas Place & Borders Lane, Loughton	Waiting restriction/s
Badburgham Court/Ninefields, Waltham Abbey	Waiting restriction/s
The Lindens, Loughton	Waiting restriction/s

Epping Forest District Council have had 12 Traffic Regulation Order schemes approved last year, which includes 6 bonus schemes above our quota of 6 schemes per year.

More information on Traffic Regulation Orders and the list of TRO schemes can be found on the North Essex Parking Partnership website [www1.parkingpartnership.org](http://www1.parkingpartnership.org).

- InstaVolt and EFDC are partnering to install 2 x rapid chargers in Oakwood Hill East Car Park. The terms of the lease have been agreed between EFDC and InstaVolt and installation of the chargers is anticipated in March 2022.
- The Off-Street Car Parks Tariff Review Recommendation report was presented to Stronger Place Select Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2021 and the recommendations approved by Cabinet at its meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> December 2021. These recommendations will be implemented on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022.

## 4 ICT

### Service Management

- The overall ICT service has improved though 2021. In 2021 the team dealt with 10,996 tickets. 70% of these were logged via the self service feature in the ticketing system and the intranet. Tickets (6304 in 2021) that can be fixed by the service desk are typically simpler and quicker to fix. More complex tickets need third line support from the application, mobile and infrastructure teams. Standard SLAs are in place for all incidents and requests. The delivery against SLA for the team in 2021 ranged from 94% to 100%.
- More work is coming to the service desk function as the other teams in ICT are able to simplify task and train up the service desk to deliver the fix at first contact point. This also improves the customer experience in terms of faster time to resolution.
- Work is ongoing tom improve the starters and leavers process. This includes improving the build process and automating the set up where possible. There were 16 new starters in Jan 2022.
- Ongoing production issues still occur. A major incident is declared for any full system outage or 4 or more customers raising the same issue. These are then dealt with using the teams Major Incident Management process to get a speedy resolution. Although the number of MIMs for 2021 was relevantly high, the fix speed was good. There is currently on average 4 MIMs per month. Problem management work is looking to address the underlying causes of the operational issues.
- Old ICT equipment is repurposed within the council if possible, otherwise it is professionally cleansed and components are recycled and donated.
- The average ticket age shows how long it takes to resolve each ticket. Some tickets are more complex than other and make take a long time to fix. The average ticket age over 2021 has reduced which is a good sign that even complex tickets are being resolved more quickly.

## Customer Feedback 2021

Response	Customer service	Technical Skill	Ticket Handling	Time taken
Very Satisfied	88%	86%	85%	79%
Satisfied	9%	12%	12%	18%
Dissatisfied	2%	2%	3%	3%

### Customer Feedback Dec 21

215 customers took time out of their day to write a comment (a sample)

- Got the job done; Very professional Team; Excellent job as usual; Great support from a very helpful team; Amazing service - thank you; The problem was sorted in record time - Absolutely Brilliant Service; Big massive thanks; I was kept informed of the progress of the problem; Thanks for dealing with my urgent request immediately; Dealt with my problem immediately and was extremely helpful, thank you so much

### **Strategy**

- Work to deliver the ICT strategy is ongoing and a series of infrastructure projects are being planned to underpin the overall move to the cloud.
- Business applications have been assessed and working with service areas a draft plan has been created that lays out the order of application migration to Software as a Service.
- The ICT strategy is now being integrated with the Digital Strategy (currently being created) to ensure the true customer value of projects is understood and the right projects are being worked on. There are a series of deliverables from the ICT strategy that will be required to facilitate the Digital strategy.

### **Projects**

- The large business projects such as digital planning, and housing continue to consume time from the team. In addition, several other large projects have been started in revs and bens, licensing and document management. ICT is working with the business areas to resource these projects in the best way.
- The team have delivered 3 key infrastructure projects :- implementation of secondary internet connection, back up to cloud and exchange server shutdown. All 3 of these help to deliver the ICT strategy to remove the resilience on the current on premise data centre and improve service reliability.
- In addition, the team worked on many business projects to deliver ICT solutions including :- implementation of debt recovery system (Ash), moving payments to cloud (PTX), upgrading income management system, implementing a new training system (Litmos) and an upgraded grounds maintenance system that facilitates in the field working.

### **ICT Team**

- Maryvonne Hassall has remained in the role of ICT service manager to allow Christine Ferrigi to concentrate on the Business support re focus work
- The newer members of the team are now up to speed. Work is being done on the skills matrix to ensure there is resilience of skills and to focus training needs for individuals. Team members are being cross trained and, where possible, tasks are being moved to the service desk to free up time to deliver other work.

- There are currently 3 vacancies in the team due to individuals leaving due to personal circumstances. These were temporarily filled by contract resource but are now being actively recruited. It is essential to get these resources on board to support the service plans and strategy for 2022/23 and beyond.