

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 20 December 2018

Subject: Customer Services

Portfolio Holder: Councillor H. Kane

Recommending:

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

1 The Customer Directorate has taken shape with the Customer Contact Team joined by the Revenues, Benefits, Corporate Communications, Civic and Member Services and Electoral Registration teams. We aim to drive forward and shape the organisation in the future as we put the customer at the heart of everything we do.

2 There are two significant events that have happened that I would like to highlight to Members. The first of these is the beta launch of the Council's new website. This is an exciting development in our drive to achieve customer service excellence and modernise the Council's operations to deliver efficiencies we need. The website is a fundamental redesign that aims to provide our customers, businesses and visitors with digital solutions they can use to self-serve and which will enable us to streamline our back-office operations. The beta site can be accessed by visiting our current website where there is an option to visit the beta version. I would encourage my fellow Members to explore the new website and provide feedback through the 'Smiley' tool linked to every page. The plan is to launch the live version of the website in January so your participation is very important.

3 The other recent development is the full roll-out of Universal Credit within our district after the last remaining Job Centre at Loughton went live on 5th December. This affects the majority of working-age benefit claimants which make up around 50% of our Housing Benefit caseload. As from 5th December any new Housing Benefit claimants of working age are now referred to the Job Centre to apply for Universal Credit which will incorporate the Housing element of their Benefit entitlement. There is a phased migration of existing Housing Benefit claimants onto Universal Credit which the Government has now extended to 2023.

4 I am aware of the financial difficulties that some Universal Claimants have experienced, particularly before their first payment arrives in around 5 weeks. The DWP offers an advanced payment scheme which can be applied for ahead of the first payment and the repayment period can extend to 12 months. However, the Council can play a role by signposting claimants to other support they can receive and officers are doing this now. Examples include the Essential Living Fund, Epping Food Bank and the Peabody. Officers will be monitoring the impact of Universal Credit on our residents and services through a new working group which will bring closer together the range of support that can be offered and identify any changes needed to service delivery to reduce any of the effects of Universal Credit.

5. On a final note I would like to explore ways in which myself and fellow Members can reduce the amount of paper we use and look to ways that we use digital methods instead. This keeps Members in line with the transformation work that the rest of the authority is undertaking and will save the Council money that can be used for services for our Council Tax payers. I initially plan to work with the Youth Council to explore the digital options and will come back to Members with the outcomes of this work.