

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 21 February 2019

Subject: Customer Services Portfolio Holder report

Portfolio Holder: Councillor H. Kane

Recommending:

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

It has been a busy period for the Customer Directorate as the new structure takes shape and teams prepare for annual billing and year-end processes for Council Tax, Business Rates and Benefits.

On an extremely positive note I am pleased to bring before Members an extension to the Council's Discretionary Rate Relief policy which provides a much-needed easing of the Business Rates burden to local retail businesses. Hundreds of such businesses will share a reduction of around £1.5 million in their bills for 2019/20.

As reported at the last Council Universal Credit is now fully rolled out for new claimants within the District. The Secretary of State is currently reviewing the Universal Credit process for existing Housing Benefit claimants who are planned to migrate to Universal credit by 2023. We await the outcome of this work. In the meantime, a working group has been set up by officers to look at the impact of Universal Credit and other welfare reforms on our customers and service provision and their findings will be reported to members. At this meeting I am also bringing forward the Local Council Tax Support scheme for 2019/20 which is recommended to remain unchanged from this year.

Empty properties remain a wasted resource within our community at a time of a national housing shortage and the Government has provided additional discretion for Council's to impose additional premiums for long-standing empty properties. I have brought forward recommendations tonight to further incentivise owners of long-term empty properties to bring them back into use.

On a different note, the Council's new website has gone live and I hope that you have all tried it out. The emphasis of the website is to make it easier for customers, businesses and visitors to transact with The Council. I am always keen to hear feedback on how we can improve our services, and this equally applies to the website so please let me know your views.

Having introduced a new website it is vital that we can get as many members of our community to feel confident and able to use it. To this end my officers are about to start a Digital Inclusion project to help our community engage with digital solutions which will help them engage with us more effectively and efficiently but also help them in their daily lives

and skills more generally. This project will also include my fellow Members to help us towards a digital way of working.