

Report to the Council

Committee: Council

Date: 25 April 2019

Subject: Customer Services

Portfolio Holder: Councillor H. Kane

Recommending:

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

1. Recent weeks have been the busiest of the year for much of the Customer Directorate. The Revenues and Benefits teams have successfully undertaken their annual billing and benefits end-of-year processes for 2019/20. An important improvement was the re-design of the Council Tax and Business Rates bills to make them clearer and reduce the need for residents and businesses to contact us. During the week following the bills being despatched in 2018 the Revenues team received 2,030 calls but in 2019 this had fallen to 1,721, a reduction of 15%. This trend should subsequently follow through the year. Similarly, during the same week there were only 2 abandoned calls from residents this year, down from 8 in 2018, already an impressive number given the volumes. The service also achieved its collection rate targets for both Council Tax and Business Rates for 2018/19. New from the Benefits team for 2019 has been the introduction of an on-line portal for landlords enabling them to view the relevant claims for them without having to contact the Council directly.

2. These are exciting times for Customer Services as two digital projects come to fruition. Members will have seen sight of the new digital solution to replace then paper agenda prior to last week's Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Officers are reviewing the feedback from Members particularly on how to support Members' needs with the introduction of the new technology. Member Services have moved into the new Customer team so that Members contact can be properly triaged to provide a more effective service. A new process will be introduced to Members for the next municipal year.

3. Members will have seen prior to this meeting the major Switch project the Council is undertaking with Citizens Online. This is a project that I am delighted the Council is involved with that will raise the digital skills of our community enabling them to access our services digitally, increasing the employability skills of our community and helping to reduce social isolation and poverty in our district. Members are part of this journey and I look forward to updating colleagues at future meetings.

4. Whilst Universal Credit is not administered by the Council it clearly has an impact on our services and more importantly our residents. In light of this a working group is underway involving the Council and a range of other organisations including the DWP, Peabody, Epping Re-use and the Epping Forest Food Bank amongst others. The aim is to properly join up processes and support networks at a local level to support claimants and ultimately this will potentially mitigate the effect on Council services such as rent and Council Tax collection, homelessness etc. This joined-up work involving Universal Credit is unique to Epping Forest, certainly within Essex. The on-going work of the Group will be fed back to the Stronger Communities Select Committee.

5. Finally, the website continues to be refined and developed. As reported to the last Overview and Scrutiny Committee there were some teething problems and some niggles remain. The feedback from Customers using the website is being closely monitored and I am pleased to confirm that use of the website continues to grow and is higher than its previous version.