

Performance/Administration Cabinet Committee

Tuesday, 26 March 2019

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Derek Shelbrooke (Chair)

Cllr John Knight (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Brian Francis
 Gary Harding
 Samir Jassal
 Lyn Milner
 Peter Rayner

Mike Bytheway Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits)
James Brooks Special Projects and Systems Support Officer
Chris Wakeford Committee Services Officer (minutes)

44. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Peter Scollard and Cllr Narinder Singh Thandi; Cllr Lyn Milner and Cllr Peter Rayner appeared as their respective substitutes.

45. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 February 2019 were signed by the Chair

46. Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made.

47. Revenues and Benefits Update

The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) provided an update to Members on current performance and changes due from 1 April 2019.

The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) highlighted the latest figures for Members, including the following:

- The average number of days to assess new benefit claims is now 18.9 and therefore under the target of 20 days. Housing Benefit claims are being processed in 17.7 days the national average was 22 days
- The average number of days to assess changes in circumstances is 4.6 days; under the target of 5 days.

- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP): 559 applications have been received with 314 being successful.
- DHP: 84 cases have involved helping customers with the spare room subsidy restriction and 78 with the Local Housing Allowance restrictions.
- In May 2018, the Universal Credit (UC) full service was rolled out across the Borough. It is now in operation throughout the whole of England and as a result the Housing Benefit total caseload (i.e. the total number of claimants within the Borough) has reduced from 6,551 at 1 April 2018 to 5,616 at 1 March 2019; a reduction of 14.27%.
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) can be awarded to top up and assist residents receiving UC providing the award includes an element for housing costs. In 2018/19 17 UC cases have received a DHP.
- The Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) has been amended to allow a claim for UC to be treated as the intention to claim council tax reduction from the date of the UC claim. That information can be obtained via the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Data Hub. A claim made in this way would of course be subject to all other rules around entitlement as a claim made directly to the Council.
- The local council tax reduction scheme for 2020/21 is currently being reviewed by a group of officers acting on behalf of Kent. The aim is to simplify and reduce the cost of administration of the scheme by moving away from a means tested reduction to a banded scheme more aligned to council tax than benefits. Further details will follow when more information is available.
- As at 26 March 2019 the collection rate for Council Tax is 96.7% the target is 97%.
- As at 26 March 2019 the collection rate for Business Rates is 98.9% the target is 99%.
- Council Tax arrears have reduced by £1.5million as at 26 March 2019, compared to those at the start of the year.
- Business Rates arrears have reduced by £800,000 as at 26 March 2019, compared to those at the start of the year.
- From 1 April 2019, local authorities are allowed to charge a 100% Council Tax premium on long term empty homes, and by resolution of the Full Council on 26 February 2019, a decision has been taken to implement the increased premium.
- A package of business rates measures were announced in the Autumn Budget to recognise that changing consumer behaviour presents a significant challenge for retailers in our town centres.
 - A one third discount for retail property with a rateable value below £51,000 for two years (in Gravesham 277 properties are affected with a cost of £700,000 but refunded by Section 31 grant)
 - To grant a 100% relief from business rates for all standalone public toilets;
 - Extension of the £1,500 business rates discount for local newspapers' office space in 2019/20 (Gravesham only have one local newspaper that qualifies for this)

The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) fielded questions from the Committee and highlighted the following:

- Residents do not have to pay back Discretionary Housing Payments unless obtained fraudulently.
- The majority of people have successfully moved over to Universal Credit and cope with managing the finances but there are quite a few cases where people are using food banks.

- The Council does its best to advertise the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (website, face to face etc.) but is happy to hear of any new communication networks that could be used especially with regards to residents with disabilities.

Resolved that the Committee noted the report

48. Citizens Access Demonstration

The Special Projects and Systems Support Officer provided the Committee with a live demonstration of the Citizens Access Council Tax online system.

Citizens Access Council Tax is going live mid-April 2019 as a view only solution that will allow customers to view the council tax account balance, instalments due and payments made, view council tax bills for current and previous years and view any discounts or exemptions including Council Tax Reduction.

Initially it is being launched without too much publicity to allow us time to test and ensure the product works as expected in a 'live' environment.

However there is still the remaining functionality of Citizens Access Council Tax to implement as well as Citizens Access Business Rates and Citizens Access Benefits.

In time, it is fully anticipated that the digital solution will generate savings in paper and postage as well as resourcing efficiencies within the team.

Following questions from the Committee; The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) and Special Projects and Systems Support Officer highlighted the following:

- Instalment payments are still set at 10 months; 12 month payments have to be applied for in writing.
- Citizens Access Council Tax is adaptable to phones and other devices.
- Emails will be sent out by the system informing customers when there is an update on their account. A text message function could be available as an extra function further down the line.
- The system also has the functionality of scanning in documents
- All Customer Services officers will have access to the new system
- The system will reduce paper, postage and phone calls but paper documents will still be available to those who request it.

The Committee thanked the Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) and Special Projects and Systems Support Officer for an informative presentation.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.27 pm

