

## **Bromsgrove District Council 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2015**

### **Report of the Portfolio Holder for Finance, ICT, HR, Emergency Planning and Enabling services**

#### **Aligned to “Help me to be Financially Independent”**

I am pleased to present an update report to the Council about the areas covered by my portfolio. In doing so I would like both to look back over recent events and forward to emerging issues.

#### **Emergency Planning**

The Emergency Planning service is across North Worcestershire and is delivered by Rebecca Pritchett, the North Worcestershire Civil Contingencies and Resilience Manager.

In our ever-changing world, emergencies can happen at any time and their cause can range from human error such as road traffic collisions, to extreme acts of nature such as large scale flooding and severe ice and snow.

In emergency planning, our aim is to reduce the chances of these emergencies occurring and if they do occur reducing their impact on residents and the environment to a minimum.

We are guided by the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The Act has established a statutory framework for civil protection and community resilience at a local level. Local responders have now become an integral part of civil resilience in the UK.

The role of Elected Members in an emergency is an important factor. Many people in the community rely on the skills, resources and knowledge of their local Elected Members. Elected Members' awareness of civil protection and emergency preparedness arrangements will contribute to the successful outcomes of an emergency incident and ultimately, the return to normality.

#### **Elected Members may be involved by:**

- becoming community supporters and champions;
- providing the political lead;
- maintaining good relationships with the media and the public;
- providing representation to government for additional resources and financial assistance; supporting and providing reassurance to the affected community;;
- giving interviews to the local media in relation to the response to the emergency and in accordance with the Council's Media Policy

As a 'category one' responder, we have a statutory duty to write, maintain and exercise emergency plans. These plans cover a wide-range of potential emergencies and are created either specifically for Bromsgrove, or as part of the wider Worcestershire based multi-agency response.

Emergency planning should aim where possible to prevent emergencies occurring, and when they do occur, good planning should reduce, control or mitigate the effects of the emergency. It is a systematic and ongoing process which should evolve as lessons are learnt and circumstances change.

## **Finance**

Provision of financial support through Housing Benefits, Council Tax Support (CTS), Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP), and the Essential Living Fund (ELF) is delivered through staff in the Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services team.

The team work with customers to identify their needs and then establish the best approach for helping the customer with their specific issues. Many customers have transactional needs such as 'collect the right amount of money owed', 'process my benefits claim in a timely manner', 'if I am entitled to financial support, help me claim the right amount', and 'make it easy for me to pay anything I have to pay the Council'.

For these customers the emphasis is on timely and accurate processing of information and claims, and providing a wide variety of payment mechanisms.

However, some customers have more complex needs and for these we help customers to access a wider range of financial support and advice to address immediate needs as well as try to help improve financial independence and make sustainable choices for the future.

New initiatives such as:

- An holistic approach to dealing with frequent users of ELF, DHP applicants and Claimants for Hardship Funding due to changes to CTS;
- Working with colleagues at BDHT, to improve the flow of information between our systems;
- Collaboration with officers in the Sunrise Project;
- Up-skilling staff in the team to be able to provide basic budgeting advice; and
- The provision of in depth financial and debt management advice through working with other agencies,

have all been put in place, and work is on-going to further develop the range of support that can be provided.

Staff in the team have been working to develop a new way of delivering financial support to customers who need help with benefits or paying their Council Tax, with the aim of helping them to become financially independent.

Officers have been working directly with customers identified as having 'financial hardship'.

This work started with applicants for the Council Tax Hardship Scheme. We identified early on that we did not want applicants to just complete a form and then receive a letter to tell them the outcome, so we committed to meeting with every applicant. This provides officers with the means to establish what the customer's needs are and work with them to identify the best solutions.

This has worked well in that we can identify a range of options including:

- Transitional support with Council Tax;
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP's);
- Debt and/or money management advice;
- Help to access training;
- Essential Living Funding to deal with any crisis situations, or payment towards goods or services which would create lasting change and help improve the customers financial independence.

The move to a Risk Based Verification process will help to improve the process of claiming for benefits, for many, whilst strengthening the ability to identify fraud and error.

The key challenges and up and coming issues in the near future include:

- Further welfare reform, such as the roll out of Universal Credit, changes to tax credits and a reduced benefit cap.
- A move to a Single Fraud Investigation Service.

### Welfare Changes

Universal Credit (UC) will launch in the Bromsgrove area towards the end of October 2015. This will only apply to any NEW SINGLE JOBSEEKERS. Once eligible for UC the person will no longer apply to the Council for Housing Benefits. Our focus will start to shift away from assessing housing benefit applications and towards the provision of support. We do not yet have a date for roll out to families, or existing claimants.

Claimants of pension age, living in supported accommodation and Council Tax Support claimants will remain the responsibility of the Local Authority, and we do not yet know the financial burden this will place on the authority.

The changes to Tax Credits and the benefit cap will bring a substantial increase in workload, as well impact for the families, as the majority of housing benefits claims from working age claimants will be affected and need to be re-assessed. Officers are currently looking at the implications for our Council Tax Support Scheme, with options for the 2017/18 scheme likely to have to take account of the national changes.

### Single Fraud Investigation Service

The investigation of Housing Benefit transfers to the DWP under the Single Fraud Investigation Service in February 2016. Responsibility for the investigation of Council Tax Support will remain within Bromsgrove District Council as will the processing of a range of data matches exercises which are currently carried out within the team. Research has been carried out and options are being considered for the future provision of a fraud service within the Council to meet these and other needs. Information on the reduction of funding in respect of fraud investigation has not yet been received from the DWP but we know that retaining staff with knowledge and experience for appropriate fraud investigation and subsidy maximisation will be vital.

Although this authority will have no control over fraud investigations into Housing Benefit claims from February 2016, we will retain the responsibility for recovering any overpayments identified. Risk based verification of claims will add assurance at the onset of new claims and a robust review programme is now in place to add security during existing claims.

## **HR**

### Completed

- Work undertaken around the Staff Survey and resultant action plan
- Support on 'Time to Talk' initiative for mental health
- Development of Training Plans and procurement of providers
- Development and delivery of corporate Health & Safety Induction
- Development of a new Corporate Induction Programme (in process)
- Procurement of new Occupational Health referral service and Employee Assistance Plan to better meet the needs of the organisation
- Transformation work currently focussing on Recruitment and Sickness Absence

- Support for service reviews, including training of employees to support them through the process and training for new managers on shortlisting and interviewing techniques
- Undertaking of work in relation to the Corporate Health & Safety Audit, including policy revision, health & safety checks and training
- Development of HR/Payroll IT interfaces (Chris21 and HR21)
- General support for managers and employees on health, disciplinary, grievance and HR legal issues

### Emerging

- Development of a Workforce Plan including development and training
- Continue to deliver the actions from the Corporate Health & Safety Audit
- Review existing HR policies to ensure they are fit for purpose and develop new ones where needed.
- Implement and rollout the HR21 system across the organisation
- Provide support to service reviews where needed

## **ICT**

### Completed

- Developed and launched a new Council Web Site
- Rolled out the HR21 system to Wyre Forest DC as part of our Payroll contract
- Provided ICT facilities to new Children's Centres
- Assisted with the migration of Worcestershire Regulatory Services ICT to Wyre Forest.
- Upgraded fifty percent of the Councils PC's to Windows 7
- Upgraded eighty percent of the Councils Servers to Windows 2012
- Delivered DPA training to the wider organisation (ongoing requirement)
- Gained PSN (Public Services Network) compliance from the Cabinet Office
- Written and developed a new data and measures dashboard system for managing corporate measures

### Emerging

- Delivery and installation of ICT facilities for the new Parkside building
- Developing a new Corporate Staff Intranet site
- Migration of two computer systems into one where possible (eg. Planning)
- Upgrade remaining PC's to Windows 7
- Upgrade remaining servers to Windows 2012
- Complete new PSN compliance audit (annual requirement)
- Upgrade the corporate electronic storage capacity
- Review Members Ipads and add additional functionality where possible.

## **Legal,**

The Legal team continue to provide support to all internal departments and projects and under service level agreement to BDHT, Worcester City and Worcester County Council. It also provides the Monitoring Officer and Legal Support to the Joint Regulatory Service advising and servicing the Joint Committee.

## **Democratic Services**

The Democratic Services team were closely involved in supporting the elections and then the immediate introduction of councillors to the Council afterwards.

The team works with the cross-party Member Development Steering Group to plan, implement and review support and training for Councillors. At the last meeting, as part of reviewing the induction process and training, it was agreed:

- to review the way that planning training is provided to members. Whilst the training was well-received it was felt it could be condensed and follow-up sessions delivered in “bite-sized” chunks;
- to trial running short update sessions prior to meetings so that members do not need to make a special journey for briefing/training sessions;
- to investigate what support is available on-line as an additional way of enabling members to learn at times convenient to them.

Training on the Code of Conduct for Parishes was well-received and a “mop-up” session was held earlier in September. As well as meeting-specific training a number of events have been arranged around knowledge and skills and dates have been communicated to members via the newsletter.

If members have any suggestions for topics to include in the future please let the Democratic Services team know or talk to your Group Leader so that it can be picked up by the Steering Group.

The Democratic Services team has also been involved in the review of the constitution which was agreed by the Council in June. The group which did this work has been re-established for this year and will meet in the coming weeks to look at other parts of the constitution with a view to refreshing, simplifying and updating it.

## **Elections**

I am pleased to report that the 2015 Elections were administered efficiently and without issue notwithstanding the immense pressures that were created by staffing issues.

I am please to report that although we are going to have to go back out to the market with the Election Managers post that all other positions are now filled and that the

team are working well to complete the Canvass and Community Governance Review.

Work continues to improve customer access and engagement within the electoral cycle and the Democratic Officers are assisting in the canvass and IER process to ensure that the register data is maximised.

Members will know that the annual write out to all properties started in July when every household was sent a Household Enquiry Form (HEF). The purpose of this form is to establish who is living at the property and to identify any new electors who need to be registered.

In order for residents to be registered on the Electoral roll they **MUST** respond to the HEF form. We are encouraging electors to use the online and texting facilities as they are simple quick and easy to follow.

Existing electors who have not confirmed under the transfer to the new Individual Electoral Registration system are not individually registered. They are potentially going to be deleted at the end of the canvass unless they respond to our requests by 1 December 2015.

The national average at present within local authorities for electors who risk being deleted is 4%. In June last year, after the transition to IER the figure for Bromsgrove District Council was 12%. Members will have read in the update sent to all Councillors in July, that 1404 (1.9%) of Bromsgrove District Council Electors remain as unconfirmed electors. This is an exceptionally low percentage and reflects the work that the elections team have been doing to encourage registration and maintain the accuracy of the register. This included personal visits by Democratic Engagement Officers to try and obtain information to verify electors.

Members are advised that a degree of pressure remains until an appropriate person can be recruited to the managers post.