

Bromsgrove District Council 21st September 2016

Report of the Portfolio Holder for Finance, ICT, HR, 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.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT UPDATE

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 try to 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.

During the last 12 months have implemented the following new initiatives:

- Placed a benefits officer within the BDHT rents team to directly deal with benefits claims and enquiries arising from customers who present to BDHT officers.
- Extended the financial independence team to deal with customers identified as being in financial hardship.
- Carried out a trial in respect of Housing Benefits overpayments to identify how we can maximise recovery.
- Developed a shared ‘compliance’ team who are identifying where both Council Tax and NDR collection rates could be maximised.

- Supporting the DWP Universal Credit roll out through a joint delivery partnership.
- Quality assurance regimes for benefit claims.

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

- The introduction of a further benefits cap.
- The next phase of Universal Credit Roll out.
- Implementation of a unified Revenues and Benefits system.
- Implementation of e-benefits.

Officers are starting to work with RSL and other agencies to ensure that those affected by the benefit cap will be supported. The benefit cap will not impact on people in receipt of disability benefits and emphasis is on helping people back into work. Officers will provide advice and support to help customers with transitional arrangements.

We don't currently have a date for the next phase of UC roll out but we know from current experience that this will bring challenges administratively. In particular is the impact on the Council Tax Support Scheme which does no longer mirrors national benefits resulting in increased administrative burdens.

The unified Revenues and Benefits system project plan is progressing on target and the expected go-live date is December 2016. This will bring considerable administrative improvements, streamline processing of straightforward claims and provide customers with easy to access methods of reporting changes in their circumstances. This is a major project and, along with ensuring acceptable service levels on the current system, is the primary focus of the team at present.

The work of the Compliance Team has been of considerable benefit with expected increases in collection of Council Tax as a result. 182 properties which had been empty long term have been bought back into use as a result of the work of this team since February 2016.

ELECTORAL UPDATE

- Polls held in Bromsgrove District Council Area
- Household Enquiry From Canvass
- Promotion

There have been two major polls held in Bromsgrove District Area this year. The Police and Crime Commissioner Election for the West Mercia Region on 5 May and the National Referendum on the European Union held on 23 June. Both polls covered the whole of the District Area but were held on different franchises. The PCC held on a local election franchise and the Referendum on a Parliamentary one.

There were a couple of new polling places used in these polls which the Electoral Matters Committee will be reviewing before the County Council Elections to be held next year.

Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) Elections

In May, six candidates stood for the Commissioner post (five Party Candidates and one Independent).

A total of 54 polling stations were used during the PCC elections employing 155 polling staff. In addition to those attending the polling station 10,332 chose to vote by post (of which 11 were sent overseas) and there were 28 proxy voters appointed.

Due to the expected lower turnout than in most other elections, it was decided to use the Abbey Stadium in Redditch to count both Redditch and Bromsgrove. Votes were verified on Thursday evening and the Police Area Returning Officer (PARO) gave the direction that the first stage of the Count be completed by 2pm on Friday. The second stage of the count was completed by 3.30pm. After all the second stage counts across the police area were complete the Conservative Candidate was elected, the declaration being made by the PARO in Shrewsbury.

There was an increase in turnout from the 2012 PCC elections from 9,777 votes to 13,110 voting (of an electorate of 72,858).

Referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union

On the 23rd June the Referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union was held. This had been particularly difficult to organise due to the timetable of the PCC election overlapping with it.

There was an increase in the electorate to 74,170 (which did not include the majority of other EU citizens). Postal vote numbers increased to 12,600 (109 of these were for electors overseas) from the previous 10,332 and proxy voters increased to 589 from 11.

Polling stations were very busy, but no significant queues were reported, although extra Poll Clerks needed to be brought in to help with the constant flow of electors at Hagley Community Centre. The 58 polling stations were staffed by 173 Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks.

The count held on the Thursday night was in the Dolphin Centre Sports Hall due to the size of the turnout, which, once all votes were verified, was announced as 79.35%. Out of the 58,855 counted votes 26,252 wished to Remain and 32,563 voted to Leave. 40 ballot papers were rejected.

Household Enquiry Form Canvass

Even though people are required to register individually, the Electoral Registration Officer still has to conduct a canvass of all properties within the District, this needs to be completed by the end of November. Due to having two large polls the start of the canvass was delayed. Forms have now been delivered and are being returned via post, internet, phone or text giving households as much choice as possible. The return for Bromsgrove currently (24 August) stands at 40.1%.

Electoral Registration Promotion

Electoral Services Staff are hoping to work with the Cabinet Office to promote Electoral Registration in the area. This is in addition to staff visiting care homes and working with schools on electoral promotion.

LEGAL UPDATE

The legal team operate as a support service providing advice and guidance to elected Members and officers and doing the legal work associated with Council services. We aim to ensure that the decisions of the Council are legal and proportionate, the actions and decisions of the Council are in the public interest and all Council documentation is robust. From time to time we represent the Council in Civil and Criminal proceedings and we also provide contracted external legal support to other public organisations.

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES UPDATE

Democratic Services have been supporting Councillors in their varied roles through the year. I would like to draw Councillors' attention to a couple of items:

Overview and Scrutiny

Council has received the annual report from the Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny at the last Council meeting reflecting the constructive working relationship that has been developed over the last year or so between O&S and the Cabinet. We have seen proactive, cross party pre-scrutiny of a number of items. Building on this the Finance and Budget working Group and the Performance Dashboard Working Group are looking closely at two important elements of our work programme, to help inform how we approach the difficult decisions awaiting us in preparing the Medium Term Financial Plan and ensuring that members are able to challenge and celebrate as appropriate the performance of services.

The Constitution

As part of our on-going commitment to ensure that the constitution accurately reflects the way that we conduct our business as a Council we have started to review the changes made to the constitution after the elections last year, of which this report is an example. Arising from the Constitution Working Group meeting we have also identified other areas to review and update and will bring forward recommendations in the coming months. As members of this Council we are all responsible for this document and I would urge members to feed into their group leaders any proposed discussion items.

Other Boards and Committees

As a result of recent changes to Board and Committee membership I hope that all Group Leaders will work with me to ensure that the member support programme continues to reflect the things that members need to enable them to work effectively for our residents. As ever this has to be driven by us.

ICT

- Migrated all PC's/Laptops from Windows XP to Windows 7;
- Migrated the majority of servers from Server 2003 to Server 2008/2012;
- Upgraded storage capacity on the corporate network;
- Trialled access for Members to the measures dashboard;
- Gained PSN (Public Services Network) accreditation for 2015/16;
- Gained SOCITM (Society for IT managers) Insight accreditation for BDC and RBC websites;
- Continued Business Transformation of the ICT helpdesk.

HR & OD

- Supporting services reviews including WRS, Environmental Services etc;
- TUPE – Burt Buses, Trading Standards;
- Rolled out trial for self-service access for managers to the HR technical system - HR21;
- Supported Time to Talk initiative;
- Continued to develop organisation wide support for apprenticeships – has resulted in 9 placements so far;
- Currently working with DWP to extend our work experience placements;
- Reviewed Occupational Health and Employee Assistance Programme Scheme;
- Transformation trial undertaken to improve our approach to recruitment and sickness reporting/monitoring;
- Currently undertaking a trial in the use of a corporate skills matrix. This links into the System Performance Framework and annual appraisal process that is being developed;

- Continued implementation of recommendations from the H&S Audit including formal approval of 7 H&S Policies.

POLICY

- Carried out a review of the measures dashboard to streamline the technical design and to develop a more focused set of measures with the officers responsible;
- Ongoing work with service areas to develop operational measures which meet their service requirements;
- Continued support for the rebranded 'Bromsgrove Engagement & Equalities Forum' (formerly Bromsgrove Equality & Diversity Forum), which now meet at Parkside;
- Launched successful new Equalities Grants process in Bromsgrove, supporting 17 different projects during the pilot, ranging from events such as Diwali to targeted activities for bereaved young people and individuals experiencing isolation:
 - First round of the 2016/17 Grants has been positive with members of the Forum scoring the applications.
- Successful celebration of LGB&T History Month across Bromsgrove.

TRANSFORMATION

- Put together "System Performance Framework" – guide to support managers and team members to get the most out of one to ones, annual appraisals and general day to day activities. This has been trialled in a number of service areas with positive feedback and will be rolled out to the wider organisation by the end of the year;
- Facilitated and supported a trial in Parks services – where Leisure & Environmental operatives have worked together to remove duplication in contacts from the public as well as working practices;
- Established CMTs & fourth tier Managers principles which have been combined to formulate a set of corporate wide principles for improving practices and behaviours;
- Supported the scope/set up and commencement of the Connecting Families project;
- Supported a recruitment trial in HR to improve the way people are recruited to the organisation;
- Supported a trial in HR relating to sickness to improve the reporting and management of sickness at a dept. level. This also includes an upgrade to the current HR software application used for the administration of sickness data and reporting;
- Setup and currently supporting a trial in Payments to look at ways of improving the service.

FINANCE

Assessing the impact of the continued financial pressures facing the Council have been the focus for the finance team in ensuring that funding is available to meet our strategic purposes and that any consultation responses detail in full the impact to the District. This has included the financial settlement, whereby, in working with the other 14 Councils most affected by the negative grant, we were successful in securing transitional grant for 2 years. In addition the Government removed the negative grant for 2017/18 and 2018/19 - however this still stands for 2019/20 and therefore continued pressure on delivering savings and growth are the key to sustainability in the future. Proposed changes to the business rate system of allocation are currently under consultation and review and the Efficiency Plan to 2019/20 is presented to this meeting for Members' consideration.

The focus over the last few months for the accountancy team has been closedown of the 2015/16 accounts which were presented to our external auditors within the prescribed deadline of 30th June. At the time of preparing this report, I can confirm that the Audit has gone smoothly and the External Auditors opinion on the accounts will be presented to this Council meeting having been considered by the Audit, Standards and Governance Committee. The finance team are now focusing on the preparation of the updated Medium Term Financial Plan to ensure that we have a robust budget for the next 4 years.

Other projects currently being undertaken are the roll out of the online functionality of the finance system to enable managers to view and interrogate their accounts and a pilot of changes to the payments system to make the process more efficient for both officers and contractors.

EMERGENCY PLANNING

The Council continues to build its resilience and preparedness over the last few months. There has been a particular focus on the Duty Incident Response Officers receiving seasonal briefings in order to prepare them for the incidents traditionally experienced over the coming months, alongside broader potential incidents, and exercising documented contingency arrangements. There has also been significant activity with regards to reviewing internal team business continuity arrangements, which is assisting the progression towards Corporate preparedness.