

## EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL March 30<sup>th</sup> 2016

### Revenues and Benefits Service 'amongst the Elite'

1. Revenues and Benefits have once again been awarded the Customers Service Excellence Award.
2. This is something that has been successfully achieved for a number of years, however the team were especially proud this year to be assessed for and gain 'compliance plus' against three criteria.
  - Making a positive change to services as a result of analysing customer journeys, with improved customer experiences
  - Providing customers with information that they need in a way that meets their needs and preferences
  - Making arrangements with other providers and partners to offer coordinated services with demonstrable customer benefits.
3. It is stated with the award that "Achieving compliance plus means your organisation is amongst the elite and contributes to setting the standard other service providers can strive for."
4. This is particularly relevant considering the huge change that the service has implemented in relation to the self-serve project, the assessor was particularly impressed with the way the service has been transformed and what is now being provided to the residents of Middlesbrough.
5. On Friday 11<sup>th</sup> March I chaired a briefing for all members which provided an update on the Self-Service programme. This is part of the wider Change Programme and Customer Strategy within which the aim is to transform the delivery of council services over a 3-year period, providing Middlesbrough residents with excellent services and access to self-serve through an extensive range of e-services. Support will be in place both to help and encourage customers who can self-serve but also to help those who are unable to do so.
6. In Middlesbrough there are currently:
  - 62,471 Council Tax Properties
  - 18,526 Housing Benefit/Local Housing Allowance households
  - 20,555 Council Tax Reduction households
  - 9,111 New claims per year

- 60,811 Changes of circumstances per year
- 40,660 telephone calls per year
- 28,436 seen face-to-face in Middlesbrough House
- 5,360 seen face-to-face at community venues
- 90,304 items of correspondence

### **Benefit Advice in Community Venues**

7. As a result of Thirteen Group’s recent announcement of the closure of their area offices at Shelton Court and Berwick Hills, the Council is actively pursuing alternative locations for our Housing and Council Tax benefit advisors, who currently have a total of 4,500 visits per year in these offices. Thorntree Hub is one alternative that is being pursued and would provide a very good location alongside other services. However, Berwick Hills Hub will be undergoing some changes from April and so another alternative is being sought in that area, at least in the short-term. Ward councillors will be advised when arrangements have been made.
8. The service offered in Hemlington Library/Community Hub will remain unchanged.

### **Average Council Tax –comparison with other authorities**

9. The Government publishes figures on the Average Council Tax per Dwelling which is simply the total charged to residents (after deductions and benefits) and including Police and Fire Authority precepts, divided by the number of dwellings. This is as opposed to the Band D rate which has been used historically for comparison, but which does not represent a true average. . At the Council meeting of 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2016, I made reference to the fact that Middlesbrough’s average council tax is lower than local, regional and national averages and the average for like authorities. The following table illustrates this:

	Average Council Tax per Dwelling 2015/16
Middlesbrough Average	£871
Tees Valley Average	£957
North East Average	£907
Similar Authorities	£1,044
All England	£1,078

### **Council Tax Collection-Impact of Government Policy**

10. In April 2013, the Coalition Government abolished Council Tax Benefit under which many of the poorest households did not pay any Council Tax and local authorities were reimbursed with full costs. There was a 10% cut in funding and responsibility was passed over to local authorities. Protection in full for pensioners meant that all working age claimants in Middlesbrough now have to pay a minimum of 20%.
11. Using the government’s own figures published by the Department for Communities and Local Government the New Policy Institute found that 72% of councils saw an increase in council tax arrears in the year following the introduction of the new scheme.

12. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that nationally in 2014/15 2.34 million low-income families would pay on average £149 more in council tax per year than they would have under Council Tax Benefit. Around 70,000 families had their support cut for the first time and a further 580,000 families will see a second successive change in their entitlement.
13. The following table illustrates the impact on Council Tax Collection rates in Middlesbrough:

### Council Tax Collection

Year	% Collected	
1993/1994	99.99%	*
1994/1995	99.99%	*
1995/1996	99.99%	*
1996/1997	99.99%	*
1997/1998	99.99%	*
1998/1999	99.98%	
1999/2000	99.97%	
2000/2001	99.88%	
2001/2002	99.68%	
2002/2003	99.39%	
2003/2004	99.18%	
2004/2005	99.09%	
2005/2006	99.02%	
2006/2007	99.12%	
2007/2008	99.04%	
2008/2009	98.98%	
2009/2010	98.87%	
2010/2011	98.75%	
2011/2012	98.68%	
2012/2013	98.45%	
Coalition Government Ends Council Tax Benefit →		
2013/2014	96.01%	95% Collection Rate
2014/2015	94.13%	all working age claimants pay minimum of 20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>98.81%</b>	

\* Estimated Collectable amount

14. The Council will continue to apply all appropriate collection measures including statutory reminders, offering dialogue in respect of arrears, assistance to realise benefit entitlement, appointment of debt enforcement officers and attachment of earnings/benefits. However collection is now being sought from the most financially vulnerable of residents, many already hit by Bedroom Tax and there are restrictions on the amount and number of orders that can be applied to recover directly from state benefits.

15. The Council does not write off potentially collectable amounts, which may still be pursued in later years and this is reflected in the figures for previous years.

### Customer Strategy Implementation

16. The implementation of the Customer Strategy agreed by Executive in July 2015 is progressing well. I would like to draw members' attention to the following developments, which will be rolled out in the coming weeks.

The screenshot shows the MyMiddlesbrough website interface. At the top, it displays the date and time (25/01/16, 12:40pm) and a 'My Account' link. The main heading reads 'Welcome to the Middlesbrough Council website'. Below this is a search bar with the placeholder text 'What would you like to do?'. A grid of ten circular icons provides quick access to various services: Bin collection, Pay my council tax, School term dates, Parking, Certificate request, Street light fault, Planning, Councillors, Report it, and Report a pothole. A 'Council services' section follows, listing 12 categories such as 'Benefits and council tax', 'Births, deaths and marriages', 'Business', 'Elections', 'Environmental issues', 'Jobs and Apprenticeships', 'Leisure, events, libraries and hubs', 'The Mayor, Councillors and committees', 'Open data, FOI and consultations', 'Parking, roads and footpaths', 'Planning and housing', 'Recycling and rubbish', 'Schools and education', and 'Social care and support'. Below the services list are sections for 'Latest news' and 'Twitter'. The 'Latest news' section includes three items dated 25/01/16 and 26/01/16. The 'Twitter' section shows two tweets from Middlesbrough Council. At the bottom, there is an alphabetical index (A-Z) and a footer with the council's logo and social media links.

17. **Customer Charter:** The Council will publish a Customer Charter in July 2016 that will clearly set out the level of customer service that the Council will provide and what residents can do to ensure that their needs are met as efficiently as possible.
18. **Website/Customer Relationship Management System:** The Council is developing an integrated approach to customer contact, and in February 2016 appointed a single provider for the new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, new website and associated e-forms. In July 2016, the Council will have a new website that will make it much easier for customers to self-serve online than currently. A screenshot of the current draft homepage of the website is included above.
19. The CRM system will in future be used to record and progress all customer contacts, including Freedom of Information requests and complaints.
20. **Middlesbrough House:** The layout of Middlesbrough House reception will be improved to promote self-serve; provisional designs of floor plans and layout are in development. The redesigned customer centre will be operational by November 2016.
21. A communication plan will be put in place to ensure that customers are informed of the benefits of planned changes to the way they will do business with the Council and access services and also around the cultural changes both internally and externally.
22. Member briefings on the Customer Strategy will be arranged for May 2016 to ensure that members are fully informed on the proposed changes and fully trained in the use of the new system.

### **Balanced Scorecards Pilot**

23. The Balanced Scorecards pilot year is now reaching its conclusion and work is underway to review and revise the model for 2016/17. This will include:
  - ensuring that the performance indicators used within scorecards and the targets for these reflect the Council's priorities;
  - reviewing the scoring and weighting model used within the pilot scorecards; and
  - establishing an agreed frequency of reporting performance to members, with the aim of integrating performance, risk revenue and capital reporting.
24. As part of the latter, work will be undertaken to streamline reports to members, member briefings will be arranged on the process for 2016/17 and modules on performance and risk management will be made available as part of the member development programme.

### **Staff Survey**

25. The results of the staff survey were submitted to LMT in February and the Staff Engagement Working Group is meeting to discuss the findings. The highest scoring statements show that the vast majority of staff who responded know who their customers are, are proud of the work they do, are aware of the equality and diversity and health and safety policies and procedures. The lowest scoring statements related to change within the Council and employee engagement. It is intended that a targeted approach will be adopted to help address some of the issues identified

The highest response rates were from Improving Public Health (69%), Safeguarding & Children's Care (63%) and Supporting Communities (53%)

### **Pensions – Re-Enrolment**

26. Every three years we have a legal duty as an employer to assess and re-enrol eligible staff into the pension scheme, this includes the Local Government Pension Scheme/Teachers' Pension Scheme and the National Health Pension Scheme. This duty applies to staff who, more than 12 months before the re-enrolment date, where 'Transitional Delay' did not apply, have opted out or ceased membership of the pension scheme. The re-enrolment date for Middlesbrough Council is 1st April 2016.

### **Holiday Pay Accrual on Overtime**

27. A Collective Agreement has been reached between the Council and the Joint Trade Unions (GMB, Unite and Unison) on changes to holiday pay arrangements. The changes are being made in response to recent legal rulings on holiday pay and the need to ensure compliance. The provisions of the agreement will be backdated to 1 April 2015 and will include Overtime, Claimed and additional hours, Standby and callout arrangements.
28. These additional payroll elements will be paid at 13.5%. Calculation of payments will be made by Payroll based on a monthly, 3-monthly average reference period. The agreed arrangements represent a fair approach to recognising and paying the holiday pay accrual for employees working overtime and additional hours.

### **Pay Policy Statement**

29. To comply with the Localism Act 2011 the Council is required to publish a Pay Policy Statement that sets out the Council's policies on remuneration of its staff. The policy must be approved by Full Council and is subject to annual review. The Pay Policy Statement has been updated for 2016/17 and will be submitted to Full Council on 30 March 2016. Once approved the Pay Policy Statement will be published on the Council's website.

### **Cap on Public Sector Exit Payments**

30. The draft Enterprise Bill which is currently working its way through Parliament contains proposals to introduce regulations to ensure the total exit costs of a member of staff when they leave the organisation do not exceed £95,000. Payments taken into account in the calculation include any redundancy payment (compulsory or voluntary) and pension strain costs. Staff have been made aware of the proposed regulations and advised to seek independent financial advice if they have concerns. The Government has recently indicated that the cap will not come into effect before 1 October 2016.

### **Helping Great Britain Work Well**

31. Health and Safety have started to promote the Helping Great Britain Work Well campaign that the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) will be rolling out during the

course of 2016. The HSE campaign will have six key themes, these are, Acting together; Tackling ill health; Managing risk well; Keeping pace with change; Sharing our success; Supporting small employees.

32. Further details of the campaign will be promoted as and when they are released. In the meantime, managers and employees across the Council have been encouraged to look again at their health and safety arrangements, policies, procedures, risk assessments and training records, to make sure they are fit for purpose.

**NICKY WALKER**  
**EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE**