

EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL

7th SEPTEMBER 2016

FINANCE

Unclaimed Benefits Campaign

1. In July 2016 two very successful initiatives that help some of the most vulnerable people in this town were brought together and extended.
2. The Unclaimed Benefit Campaign provides Middlesbrough residents with advice and support to claim welfare benefits to which they are entitled. The service is peripatetic, usually delivered from one venue for two weeks before moving to the next venue. Between January 2015 and March 2016, it assisted over 1,000 people to claim £3.3 million in benefits.
3. The Hub Advice Service provides residents with benefits and debt advice. Advice and support is delivered weekly from the same locations. It has assisted 568 people to claim £1.03 million in benefits and 282 people to manage £1.1 million of debt.
4. Both services are delivered by a partnership of organisations including Middlesbrough CAB, ACTES, Age UK Teesside, Cleveland Housing Advice Centre and Middlesbrough Council's Welfare Rights Unit
5. Further savage cuts to welfare spending, including £12 billion announced in 2015, indicate that demand will continue well into the future. Changes to the benefit system, particularly the phased introduction of Universal Credit, which started in Middlesbrough in February 2016 will add to the demand for advice. Those affected will need to come to terms with the disruption to household budgets caused by the new system, which includes an extensive waiting period for payment of benefit, monthly rather than weekly payments and cuts to rates of benefit.
6. The two campaigns have developed as separate but linked initiatives, but will now merge into an integrated model for the delivery of a single benefits take up service based in the community.
7. It has been agreed to provide mainstream funding of £200,000 per year to support the delivery of the integrated service over the long term. This funding will come from the Community Support Fund which has previously been used to support such initiatives.
8. In addition, partners have had discussions with the Big Lottery (BL) to determine the opportunity of developing a bid to their Reaching Communities programme. The BL have encouraged a bid (based on the evidence to date of the programme) which, if successful, would provide approximately £100,000 per annum for 3 years. The funding would be to further enhance the services.

As well as helping some of our most vulnerable residents, this initiative helps to replace some of the local spending power this Government has taken out of Middlesbrough through its welfare cuts

GOVERNANCE

Tablets

8. Some members, including backbench members, scrutiny chairs and executive members have been involved in a trial of tablets to replace members' existing personal computers. The roll out to all members was delayed after the initial device trialled was found to have connectivity problems once the council's systems and security had been installed on it. These have been replaced with a different model which works far more effectively and these new devices should be rolled out to all members shortly. Training will be provided.
9. Whilst I am aware that a number of members have been wanting to move to tablets, I did not want other members to have to experience the level of inconvenience that some on the trail had had to endure with the previous device.
10. The move to tablets follows recommendations from Scrutiny and is part of the Change Programme. It will provide significant financial savings as well as they are cheaper to buy than PCs which in many cases have been due for replacement for some time and also as they can be used at meetings, drastically reducing the need to use paper. A scrutiny report in 2013 found that the council spends around £14,000 each year on the printing of committee documents.
11. As part of the Democratic Services Review there is a recommendation for shorter reports across the authority, which will make it easier to use tablets for meetings.
12. The tablets will not only offer members the opportunity for use at meetings but also at ward surgeries or community meetings where residents' queries can be directly entered into the Onestop system.
13. Members will be able to retain the use of their keyboard, mouse and monitor, all of which connect to the tablets

New Onestop

14. The current system for members' casework and queries, as many have remarked, is not user-friendly and needs replacing. I understand that it was only ever intended as a temporary solution when the Council moved from Lotus Notes. Moreover, the current system involves several back office processes which are costly in terms of officer time and can cause delays in action and response time.
15. It is envisaged that a new system would be fit for purpose, provide for the easier input and view of all casework, provide automated response to constituents and swifter response time.
16. I have had meetings with officers and the new providers of the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system on the design of a new system around members' needs. There will be an event arranged shortly, where all members can be consulted on their requirements before the final stages of design.

Health & Safety

17. The team have been working with Asset Management on a revised Emergency Evacuation Procedure covering Fire, Bomb Threat, Gas Leak and Firearms/Weapons Attack. The Health & Safety Advisor (Fire) is providing updated training for all nominated Fire Wardens and Building Controllers. The H&S Advisor has also been providing advice on the accommodation moves from Vancouver House.

Embedding Middlesbrough Manager/Middlesbrough Employee

18. As previously reported, work is on-going to embed the Middlesbrough Manager and Middlesbrough Employee competency frameworks across the organisation. Whilst the frameworks are being used for appraisals and recruitment and selection, there is a need to embed these further with managers and staff if the Council is to achieve the change in culture and behaviours needed to achieve the Mayor's vision and deliver outcomes of the Change Programme. In consultation with the Business Change Leads an acronym DIRECT has been agreed for the six behaviours included in the frameworks
- Deliver
 - Influence
 - Responsible
 - Engage
 - Change
 - Think
19. The acronym should make these behaviours more memorable to staff. The acronym was launched in this month's Staff Newsletter and will be included as footer on the HR Service's emails and widely promoted internally.
20. Phase 3 of Middlesbrough Manager is now underway and will include learning and development activities for managers and employees aligned with the Middlesbrough Manager/Middlesbrough Employee Competency Frameworks. The activities will be delivered using a range of learning and development activities including blended learning (a mix of classroom based and e-learning), e-learning modules on Middlesbrough Learns, classroom based training, briefing sessions and coaching. The first programmes of training to be delivered are the Customer Service Strategy Training and Project Management Training; these are both currently being rolled out

Team Awards Night

21. I mentioned in my previous report that the Team Awards Night was to take place on the 8th July. The Team Awards Night is a key part of the Council's commitment to recognising and celebrating the hard work and achievements of its staff and volunteers. Award submissions were received from teams across the Council. The continued support of the external sponsors makes this event possible. Team of the Year was awarded to the Gleneagles Resource Team. This team provides support to the most vulnerable children in Middlesbrough and the service was rated as Outstanding and Excellent by Ofsted. The evening, funded by sponsorship, gave an insight into the variety of excellent work going on throughout the Council.

Staff Survey Actions

22. The 'Staff Survey Top 10 Actions' include offering improved employee benefits and arranging more staff activities. Staff have been invited to a 'bring your own' Staff Picnic over lunchtime on 24th August in Centre Square, this event has been arranged by members of staff who have agreed to act as Employee Engagement Champions. A Cash Health Benefit scheme, Health4All, has been launched. A health cash plan is an excellent way for staff to manage the cost of their everyday healthcare by paying a small monthly premium (there are five different levels). This enables staff to claim cash back on dental, optical and therapy treatments. The scheme also includes 24/7 counselling and information helpline, a free GP helpline and online discounts with hundreds of special offers on well-known brands.

Staff Support

23. Following a procurement exercise a new external occupational physiotherapy provider, Body2Fit, has been appointed. This provider comes with an excellent reputation for being pro-active and we are confident that staff will benefit from the pro-active service they offer.
24. Mindfulness sessions continue to be offered to staff. These sessions are aimed at anyone that would like to understand the processes and reactions associated with change and gain practical strategies to cope with change and the pressure of daily life in the 21st Century's changing, challenging times. Discussions during the sessions are confidential and are available in September, November and March.

NICKY WALKER
EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE