

## EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL 30 November 2016

### FINANCE

#### Members Finance Training

1. To enable those who hadn't already attended Finance Training or for those who wanted a 'refresher', I asked for a training session available for any member to attend to be arranged before the more formal budget process starts. This was held on 10<sup>th</sup> November and included information on Financial Governance, External and Internal Audit, Revenue and Capital and the council's Investment Programme. We also included activities, aimed at making the session more interesting and members present certainly demonstrated a good understanding of the subject matter.

#### Housing Benefit and Garden Charges

2. Housing Benefit is paid by the Council in line with government legislation and instruction from the Department for Work and Pensions. Following a court ruling on these regulations, personal garden charges can no longer be included as part of the eligible rent that Housing Benefit can cover, therefore tenants of those Housing Associations involved have been informed that their Housing Benefit has been revised to reflect this from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2016 and been given the option of discontinuing the garden service.

#### Benefit Cap

3. My last report to Council mentioned the introduction by Central Government of a new Benefit Cap which will hit some of the most financially vulnerable families in Middlesbrough and remove over £1million from the town. The Benefit Cap means that some who previously had all of their rent paid by Housing Benefit will now have to pay a large proportion of or all of the rent less 50p.
4. Early figures indicate when the new cap is applied 502 families in Middlesbrough will be affected, while 93 families may have their Housing Benefit reduced to 50p-a-week. This can be broken down as follows:
  - £100 + - 20 families
  - £75 - £99 – 102 families
  - £50 - £74 – 90 families
  - £25 - £49 – 46 families
  - £0.01 - £24 – 244 families.
5. I recently took part in a BBC Tees interview on this subject along with a representative of a charity who highlighted the increased use of food banks and potential increased homelessness.

6. At a local level we are undertaking a lot of work to try and assist residents who may be affected by these changes to minimise their effects. Officers have been seconded from the Citizen's Advice Bureau to directly liaise with residents affected and those worst affected are being contacted as a priority. They will be offered appointments to discuss their personal circumstances either at home or in their local community Hub. The Council's website is also being amended to provide a number of options residents may wish to consider if they are subject to the Benefit Cap. In addition, the Benefit Service is working closely with partner organisations within the town's Financial Inclusion Group to mitigate the impact on residents wherever possible and to provide targeted support for those most in need.
7. Members were sent a briefing note on this issue along with information that broke down the number of claimants effected by postcode areas.
8. Any Middlesbrough resident who requires help regarding the Benefit Cap can call the helpline on 01642 802303 and speak to an adviser.

### **Council Tax and Hardship Fund**

9. From April 2013, as a result of changes brought in by Central Government all working age claimants have had to pay at least 20% of Council Tax. This was yet another benefit reduction measure hitting those least able to pay, many of whom had were also being hit by the Bedroom Tax.
10. The overall collection rate as at 14 October 2016 in respect of claimants of Council Tax Support which replaced Council Tax Benefit is 49.9%. While over 83% of claimants make all or some payment, there are clearly a number of financially disadvantaged household who are financially unable to meet their Council Tax liability, with 17% of residents receiving Council Tax Support making no payments to date.
11. Therefore this is often a case of Can't Pay rather than Won't Pay. It is recognised that some individuals experience genuine hardship in meeting their financial obligations and therefore the Council operates a hardship fund to help those who are considered to be unable to pay their council tax. This is a discretionary scheme and the cost of assisting such residents is met by the Council. The number of applications for such help since the inception of CTS has previously been very small and it is considered this may be due to lack of publicity and awareness of the scheme.
12. In order to encourage uptake, the scheme is to be promoted through the Council's website and also detailed in any recovery documents sent by the Revenue Services section for non-payment of Council Tax. Any support will be provided on the condition that individuals ensure that they pay their contribution.

### **Purchasing Cards**

13. Middlesbrough Council has promoted purchasing cards as its preferred method of payment and in order to produce a saving, had a target of achieving £5million worth of spend through the cards between August 2015 and July 2016. This was successfully achieved with the result that we received a £27,000 rebate from RBS (Royal Bank of Scotland). This has also reduced the total number of invoices going through our accounting system by 34,210, producing further savings. This payment method also supports our target for payment within 20 days. A new target has been set for the period August 2016 – July 2017 which is £10million worth of spend through purchasing cards, which if achieved would see a rebate of £58,000 and would also see a further significant reduction of orders and invoice processing.

## **GOVERNANCE**

### **Appointment of Senior Coroner**

14. Following a lengthy interim period, during which the possibility of a merger with the Hartlepool Coroners area was considered and discounted, I was part of the interview panel which held interviews, over a two-day period, for the post of Senior Coroner for Teesside. From an impressive field of applicants, it was agreed that Clare Bailey, the current Acting Senior Coroner, was the outstanding candidate, and following consent from both the Chief Coroner and the Lord Chancellor, Clare has been appointed to the permanent role of Senior Coroner.
15. Clare has been Acting Senior Coroner for Teesside since the departure of Michael Sheffield in 2014. Under Clare's guidance, the service has been transformed from one of the worst performing areas in the country to one which performs in the top quartile nationally. Both the Council and Clare are looking forward to continuing their excellent working relationship as the service moves forward.
16. Now in full delivery stage, the Customer Programme has seen some real achievements over recent months.

### **ICT**

17. The ICT Service has recently been undertaking a service improvement programme, ICT Customer First. This programme of work will shortly be coming to an end and as a result, the ICT service re-launched on the 14<sup>th</sup> November

### **Council Email on Personal Phones**

18. ICT Services have developed a secure solution to allow staff and members to have their Council email and calendar on their personal mobile phones via an App. The streamlined solution is fully compliant with our security standards and only requires the entry of pin number, which is set by the user, in order to access their email and calendar.
19. I have asked the Members be included in the first part of the roll out and as a result you should be contacted shortly to be asked if you think you would benefit from having access to emails on your personal devices.

### **Password Reset Tool**

20. Staff and members have been offered the opportunity to enrol, in advance, for the new password recovery tool FastPass. This tool will allow you to reset forgotten passwords and unlock your user account. You will have already received a personalised email from the FastPass tool with a link taking you through a short registration process. It is really easy but if you do have any questions or need help and support to complete the process just call ICT Services on 727001.

### **Launch of Self-Service Portal**

21. On Monday 14<sup>th</sup> November ICT Services launched a new self-serve portal, yourICT. This will allow the logging of incidents and requests 24/7 and keeping track of open calls. The portal can be accessed via a new icon.
22. Going forward instead of emailing requests or incidents to the IT-Helpdesk email account, they can be logged quickly and easily via the portal. All requests and incidents logged via yourICT will be automatically logged in the Service Desk solution meaning our Service Desk operatives

can respond quickly to requests; in addition you will be able to track progress of your job via the portal.

23. There are templates for the most common requests which make logging the request much more streamlined. In the coming weeks ICT will be adding more templates for requests to make the whole process of accessing ICT Services much more efficient and effective.
24. There is also an announcements area in the yourICT portal where you can keep up to date with news and key updates from ICT, as well as a FAQ section for popular enquiries to the service.

### **Customer Strategy**

25. The principles of the Customer Charter which was designed and developed earlier this year and referred to in my earlier reports, is now publicised through a marketing and communications campaign aimed at residents and other 'customers' who may contact the Council
26. The Charter has formed the design principles for all other Customer projects:
  - The customer will always be our focus
  - We will give you the ability and support to 'do it online'
  - Give us your information once and we will do our best to remember it
  - We will keep it simple
  - We will get it right the first time
  - We will treat you fairly and with honesty
27. The Employee Development Programme (EDP) aims to equip all staff with the right behaviours, skills and attitude to ensure our residents and other 'customers' receive a consistent level of improved customer service. An initial session for Assistant Directors will take place mid-December with the remainder of the programme being rolled out from January to April 2017 using a variety of methods such as workshops, e-learning and toolbox talks.
28. The Customer Relationship Management System is the underlying technology used to manage and analyse the needs of residents/customers who contact the Council with queries or requests for services. Phase 1 of the new system replacement with the new provider Firmstep, will be complete by the end of December 2016. 50 processes / e-forms have been re-designed to offer residents/customers a more streamlined service, which will now ensure they are kept informed of progress against their service requests.
29. As mentioned in my earlier reports, there is an emphasis on enabling residents to self-serve online, making it easier and more convenient for them to do so. Other methods of contact such as telephone and face-to-face contact will still be available where needed. The marketing and communications has used different methods to share the message of 'Save Time, Go Online', such as bus shelters, posters and leaflets, editorials and advertisements in 'Love Middlesbrough', internal messages to staff, social media messaging and use of email signatures in Revenues and Benefits and the Contact Centre.
30. Work is underway to map out Phase 2 which will further reduce the reliance on back-office manual processes and enabling operatives to become truly mobile.

### **New Report It App**

31. Within Phase 2, the 'Report It' app will be launched, which will allow residents to report issues directly using their own smartphone or tablet. It will mean residents can take a picture of issues such as fly-tipping or graffiti, add some information to help the Council deal with it and

the app then utilises the GPS feature on the phone to send the report to the Council complete with location.

### **New Onestop System**

32. Also within Phase 2, a new system to replace and improve the current One Stop Shop will be developed. At my request, a Members workshop took place on 7 November to gather Members requirements for this new system and this information will be used to feed into its development. Any member who has further suggestions or was unable to attend the workshop can email [Rebecca.Redman@methods.co.uk](mailto:Rebecca.Redman@methods.co.uk)

### **New Website**

33. September saw the launch of the Council's new website which offers customers a service-led and service driven approach to contacting the Council. The new website now averages 275 new user accounts per week since it went live, which is a 49% increase from 134 per week. Feedback to date has been positive.

### **Middlesbrough House**

34. Work on the redesign of the Middlesbrough House customer centre is underway with a project group established and a project plan in development. The existing service will be temporarily relocated to the old register office site from mid-December 2016 to the end of March 2017. Service areas have been consulted and arrangements are underway to consult with residents on their views of the proposed plans.

### **Council Improvement Plan delivery**

35. We are continuing to push forward with delivery of improvement actions set out within the Council Improvement Plan (CIP). The CIP contains actions split across the following themes:
- Financial performance reporting;
  - Financial planning;
  - Performance management;
  - Risk management;
  - Decision making;
  - Asset management;
  - Change Programme / Programme and Project Management;
  - Capital Programme monitoring; and
  - Embedding business change.
36. Members are able to access information on the detailed progress being made from the periodic reports submitted to Corporate Affairs and Audit committee, myself and the Executive since the CIP was first drafted in May 2016.
37. The CIP has been independently reviewed by our former Auditors Deloitte who have also been able to provide an independent view on delivery of actions within the plan. Of the 24 actions contained within the CIP, 20 will be completed by February 2017, with the remainder on target for delivery by September 2017.

## **HR**

### **Appraisal Review**

38. HR have carried out a fundamental review of the existing appraisal framework, processes and materials to ensure it is fit for purpose across the organisation following an employee and manager

survey carried out in June 2016. Feedback suggested that the existing framework and documentation was too complicated and difficult to apply in some work areas.

39. As a result the appraisal process and the guidance and paperwork have been streamlined. The Middlesbrough Manager and Employee competency frameworks also have been simplified and aligned to the recently launched DIRECT acronym (Deliver, Influence, Responsible, Engage, Change, Think) which summarises the competencies and behaviours. The revised approach will help embed the frameworks and improve the quality and completion rates of appraisals carried out.

#### **Annual Workforce Monitoring Report**

40. The annual Workforce Monitoring Report has been published on the Council's website. The report provides a summary of the workforce as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016 and provides a useful overview of the composition of the Council's workforce.
41. The report provides the ability to track any particular trends and to review progress on the Council's ambition of trying to achieve a workforce that more closely reflects the local community.
42. The Level Playing Fields Action plan underpins the organisation's commitment to reduce barriers to employment and support existing employees with disabilities / mental health issues or who come from under-represented communities. The Council is also in the process of setting up a corporate Equality and Inclusion Working Group with the objective of encouraging a more diverse workforce and to explore ways of achieving this.

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