

EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: FINANCE & GOVERNANCE – COUNCILLOR NICKY WALKER

DATE OF MEETING: 16 October 2024

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update to members on areas of activity within my portfolio including performance against strategic priorities.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

2. Strategic Priority: We will ensure that we place communities at the heart of what we do, continue to deliver value for money and enhance the reputation of Middlesbrough.

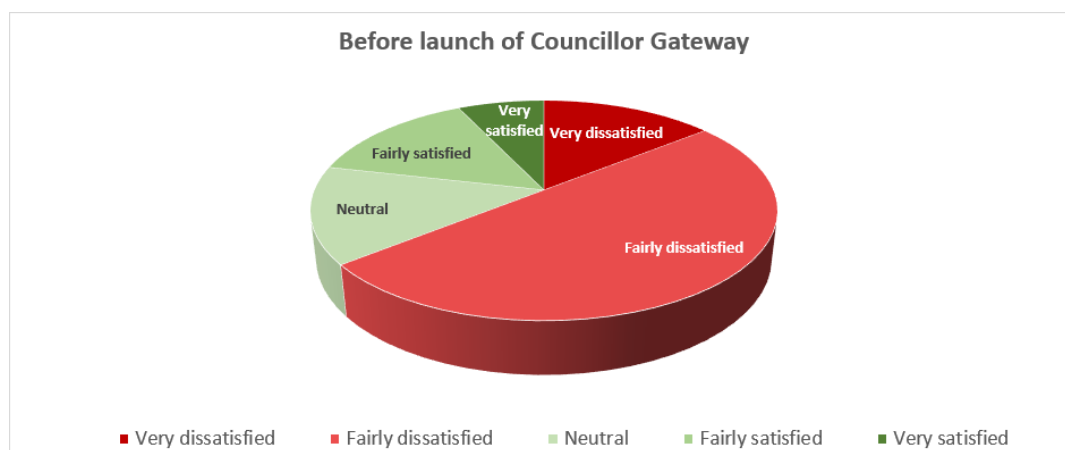
Update:

3. I continue to have weekly briefings with each of the two directors relevant to my portfolio as well as frequent additional meetings and contact with them and other officers as appropriate.

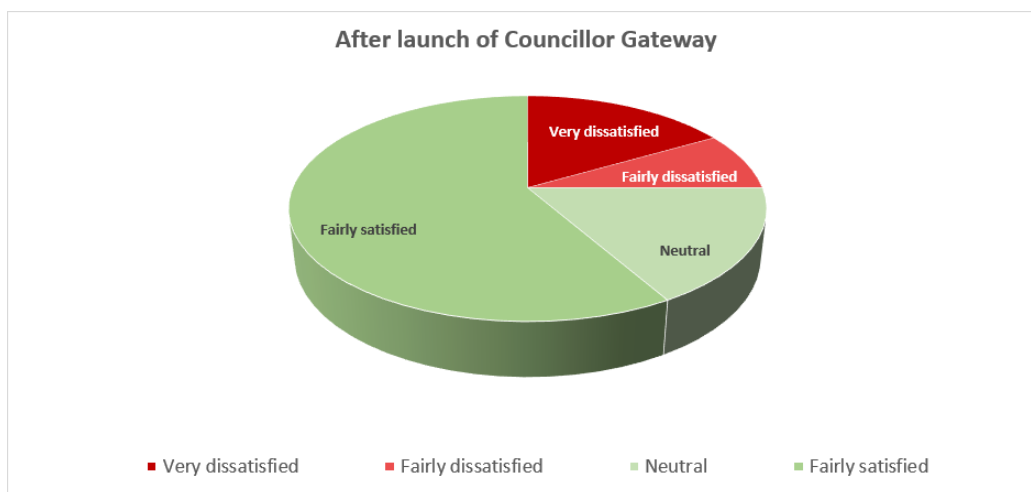
HIGHLIGHTS

Councillor Gateway

4. A recent survey of councillors showed increased satisfaction with the system for members' enquiries.
5. Before the Councillor Gateway system was launched, there was a 36% satisfaction rating amongst Councillors in relation to the old method of the onestop email.



6. This satisfaction rating has since risen to 75% following the introduction of the new Councillor Gateway system.



7. In addition, further suggestions for improvements to the system that were given by members completing the survey were analysed and where appropriate, actions taken to put these suggestions in place.
8. Of course, work remains ongoing in addressing any issues raised by members and following up suggestions for improvement and I continue to work with officers on this. The aim is to get the satisfaction levels higher, but the feedback reflects an encouraging trend such a short time after the new system was introduced.
9. I would like to again extend my thanks to officers who have delivered this project in a much shorter space of time than has been the case with other authorities and to all the councillors who have participated in the design and roll out of the system and worked collaboratively on it.

THE TIME AHEAD

Household Support Fund

10. The last round of the Household Support Fund was delivered between 1 April 2024 and 30 September 2024 and used to target four main groups:
- Families with children and in receipt of benefits.
 - Pensioners in receipt of Council Tax Reduction and in receipt of Pension Credit Guarantee Credit
 - Singles/Couples in receipt of benefits.
 - Application-based awards for residents not in receipt of Council Tax Reduction or other benefits.
11. Middlesbrough's allocation from central government for that period was £1,653,615. It had previously been expected that the Household Support Fund could end on 30 September 2024. However, on 02 September 2024 the new

Work and Pensions Secretary announced an extension to the Household Support Fund for the next six months, with a total of £421million for local authorities across England to be used up until April 2025 to help those struggling with the cost of energy, food, and water.

12. It was announced on 27 September 2024 that Middlesbrough has been allocated a similar sum to that we received in the last round.
13. I will be presenting a report to the Executive on 28 October 2024 proposing how this money should be allocated to support our residents and have been working with officers on this, in consultation with the Mayor and Executive members. My aim is that we should continue to provide support families and other residents on low incomes but should on this occasion prioritise those pensioners on low incomes, who will lose the Winter Fuel Payment this year. Council support for this approach is requested in a motion to Council at the meeting tonight.
14. I would also like to seek the help of councillors to encourage their residents to use the scheme where they might qualify, once applications are open. There will be those for who the Council already holds bank details, for example those on Housing Benefit or who received an award earlier from the Household Support Fund who can be paid automatically, but others will be invited to apply based on data held by the Council. I understand from officers that there was only around a 50% response rate from those contacted in the last round, meaning that many missed out. I will ensure that all councillors are made aware of the details of the scheme and when applications, where necessary, can be made.

Pension Credit take-up

15. It has been estimated that nationally up to 880,000 or 63% of eligible pensioner households are entitled to, but not receiving Pension Credit, meaning over a third, or 37%, who would be eligible for this support, and would also be entitled to the Winter Fuel Payment are missing out. I would like to thank our officers for their continued work in reaching out to pensioners in Middlesbrough. I reported last month how 750 letters were being issued to households across the town where it's believed individuals may be entitled to Pension Credit who are not currently receiving it, and support of our Welfare Rights Team is offered where appropriate.
16. Pension Credit tops up weekly income to £218.15 if the claimant is single, or joint weekly income to £332.95 for a couple. If their income is higher, they might still be eligible for Pension Credit if for example they have a disability, have dependents living with them or they are a carer.
17. Councillors may also wish to provide pensioners, or their relatives, in their ward with the number for the Pension Credit Claim Line: 0800 99 1234. Applications can be made by phone, instead of through the online form, and the call can be made by a friend or family member if the pensioner applying is unable to use the phone.

18. For those unsure as to eligibility, there is also an online Pension Credit Calculator [Pension Credit calculator - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/pension-credit-calculator)

Communication and Member Resources Working Group

19. I have mentioned previously that I would like to set up a member led Communication and Member Resources Working Group to look at communication issues that may be impacting members in carrying out their role.
20. All councillors have been sent an invitation and are welcome to attend the first meeting on Wednesday 09 October at 4.30pm in the Collaboration Event Space, Ground Floor, Fountain Court.
21. The aim would be eventually, if members feel it would be useful, to establish a regular forum where general issues impacting on member communication, particularly between members and officers, can be raised and discussed.
22. This has largely come about through issues that councillors have raised with me in my Governance role, or I have heard concerns expressed about at briefings.
23. Some key areas we may wish to start exploring are:
1. some type of member handbook or resource, available on the Bridge.
 2. how members can raise general questions with officers about for example an area of policy or a development in their ward which are not covered by the Councillor Gateway or NAP meetings,
23. As well as perhaps
3. to present resolutions to issues for officer consideration.
 4. to ensure that members are updated on any process, policy or procedure that may impact on them.
 5. Other areas members may feel are important.

NAME: Cllr Nicky Walker

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