

EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL Wednesday 24th March 2021

DECISIONS

The following papers went to Executive on 16th March:

Process to Administer Grant Funding

Tender Pipeline Approval 2021/22

STRATEGIC

Human Resources

1. Provided Member briefings to give Members background knowledge to the pay policy within the Council and how arrangements came about, covering the pay and grading structure and the national framework of terms and conditions. Also discussed the reason for the Pay Policy Statement and the requirement to have it approved by Council each year and published on our website. The Pay Policy statement will be coming to Council on 24th March 2021.
2. Staff Survey on appraisals currently running to look at whether we stick with an annual appraisal process or move to a more fluid regular meeting process.

PERFORMANCE

Registrars

3. When lockdown began on 23rd March 2020, we were required to cease birth registrations – when we resumed in July 2020, we had **1300** outstanding births to register. We have now caught up with this but still have the odd errant birth that needs registering from March / April / May onwards. At present, we have approximately 240 o/s birth registrations – this is of course added to every day as births occur at JCUH. At Middlesbrough, we register on average 5500 births PA.
4. Between 1.4.19 and 31.3.20, the office registered **2579** deaths. From 1.4.20 to 28.2.21, the office has registered **2735** deaths with figures from the month of March, still to be added. All death registration from 23.3.20 have been facilitated by telephone in line with the Coronavirus Act 2020.
5. Since the Government announcement on 22.2.21 with reference to wedding / civil partnership ceremonies, there has been a surge in enquiries about booking weddings / re-arranging etc. Yesterday, the girls fielded between 160 -200 calls, mainly about marriages. Ceremonies can recommence on 29.3.21 (with certain

restrictions still in place) and from this date, we have 226 ceremonies already booked in (up to 31.3.22) with many outstanding enquiries to still be dealt with.

ICT

6. ICT Services have provided the ICT work stream for a solution called VoiceScape and on 14th December 2020 Revenues and Benefits went live with a 6 month trial of a telephony solution provided by an external partner. This solution is designed to contact the service's customers (particularly those who owe Council Tax and business rates and are at an advanced recovery stage) and put them through to a dedicated phone line where staff will support them so that they can hopefully repay any outstanding Council Tax, make an arrangement or set up an affordable direct debit. The solution contacts customers on the Councils behalf (which will use less manpower and time, releasing this time to work on other parts of the busy service – such as paying some of the new Covid grants). This has worked extremely well in neighbouring services such as Thirteen Housing Group for Rental Arrears, however Middlesbrough Council is the first Revs & Bens service in the country to use this solution. Rotherham, and West Lancs Borough Council use the solution for other services they deliver. This is an exciting project and we are very hopeful of a successful result. Council Tax and Business Rates are an essential part of the Councils income streams and the cost of collecting is often very high with numerous contacts made to those with an outstanding balance. The solution itself will make calls, leave voice messages and send text messages, before putting the customer directly through to a call handler, with no queue once they consent to the call. All calls are made from a local number (01642 843027).

Revenues and Benefits

7. Despite the sheer volume of additional work the service had to respond to this year due to Covid 19, they still managed to roll out their new ward based operating model. Dedicated case workers were assigned to wards, each with differing collection strategies, designed based on the requirements of the ward and the needs of the residents. Whilst the model is still in its infancy, early indications suggest a very promising outcome. It's so pleasing to see customers engaging with staff at a more personal level, going that extra mile to support our residents, when debt becomes a problem.
8. Following an extensive change programme the service went live with Stop the Knock earlier this year. Due to all of the additional demands placed on the service brought about by Covid 19 this has impacted on the services ability to pick up pace. However a full redesign of the internal offering means the team are ready to move forward at speed as we move into the new financial year.

INVOLVEMENT AND PROMOTION

Human Resources

9. The team have been working on supporting the setup of Covid testing sites including high volume recruitment to tight deadlines. Whilst working at pace they also managed to secure ongoing work for 1 person who was on redeployment, 3 people via the Councils Routes To Work team (long term unemployed) and also 10 Casual staff who are currently unable to work because of Covid restrictions.

Revenues and Benefits

10. Revenues and Benefits have successfully held the Customer Service Excellence Accreditation for 25 consecutive years. Every year they are assessed against 57 criteria – having to demonstrate improvements year on year. This year the service underwent a full reassessment and having to provide significant amounts of evidence that demonstrated how they met the criteria by putting the customer at the heart of their Service.
11. The outcome has been confirmed that the service have achieved Customers Service Excellence again, however more importantly – it has also been confirmed that service have been awarded ‘Elite’ Customer Service in 10 criteria which is the highest the Service have ever achieved. The assessor also commented that he has only come across one other organisation with Customer Service Excellence who hold this level of achievement.
12. Since the onset of Covid 19 the Service has been a key player in delivering the much needed millions of financial support to both residents and businesses.
 - Millions of pounds of support have been provided to our local businesses with more to follow
 - Delivering/delivered a staggering 16 initiatives which cut across a number of services
 - Providing financial support to partnering organisations – reducing food poverty, Thousands of residents given additional financial assistance, partnering organisations provided with funding plus schools to support our ‘no child should go hungry’ initiative, circa 6000 families provided with vouchers at each school holiday to support with food, clothing, fuel and essential items and worked with a 3rd party to deliver food parcels to 400 of our most vulnerable families
 - The service have paved the way developing numerous policies - progressing at speed - in a number of instances, the first in the Tees Valley to launch and pay schemes
 - The service have received National Recognition/Press Recognition, recognised for innovative ideas, numerous policies and reports written seeking Executive sign off
13. The service have also been praised for this year’s subsidy return. It is the highest level of achievement known to the service. Following a rigorous check by External Auditors only one small change was required to the return. This not only demonstrates the quality of the data being processed but equally ensures that the service are maximising income to the Council.