

CABINET MEMBERS REPORT TO COUNCIL

27 February 2019

COUNCILLOR S BÜTIKOFER - CABINET MEMBER FOR CORPORATE SERVICES & STRATEGY (LEGAL, DEM SERVICES & BENEFITS)

For the period May to June 2019

1 Progress on Portfolio Matters.

Democratic Services

The period following an election is a busy and exciting time for Democratic Services and hopefully Members will have found the induction programme to date useful and enjoyable. The team will ask for feedback formally so that we can further refine what we offer to members but we are always glad to hear how we can support Members better at any time.

In previous terms the induction programme has been confined to the initial period during the election, this term we are taking a different approach, following engagement with the Member Development Group. This will involve moving to a process of continuous skills burst development for Members over the course of the term. Please let the team know if you would like anything in particular to be included or would like any that have already taken place, repeated.

Benefits

Universal Credit (Full Service) has now been rolled out to all Job Centre Plus offices in the North Norfolk area. This means that we can no longer accept Housing Benefit claims from working age residents unless the resident occupies temporary or supported accommodation, or they are entitled to a Severe Disability Premium.

Although the Team are seeing a slight reduction to our overall live caseload for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support, Universal Credit is causing an increase in the number of change of circumstances coming through for Council Tax Support due to the manner in which Universal Credit treat changes to income. This is a problem which is mirrored nationally.

Households are seeing their Council Tax Support entitlement continually re-assessed, sometimes with multiple assessments in the same month, leaving residents unsure what their Council Tax payments should be, difficulties around budgeting, and subsequently finding themselves in arrears.

We believe we can develop our working practices and will be looking to re-design our Council Tax Support Scheme in order to tackle the increased administration, make the process of claiming simple, easy to understand, fair, cost neutral, and one which supports our most vulnerable residents.

The team in benefits can see opportunities to simplify the claim process, reduce waiting times for the outcome of new claims and changes to circumstances, and prevent hand offs between front office and back office teams. We are working with Policy & Practice who have been commissioned to provide Council Tax Support re-modelling across North Norfolk. The models will be used to examine the social and political impacts of scheme changes. Once a preferred option has been chosen at service level, a Council Tax Support Working Party will convene to examine the proposals. This has been scheduled for August/September 2019.

The team have identified a significant number of service improvements which will support delivery of a new customer service ethos. Over the last couple of months we have started to undertake the following improvements.

- Introduction of shorter claim forms.
- Hybrid Mail solutions.
- Investment in customer self-serve opportunities:
- Development of online claim forms.
- Introduction of online change of circumstances reporting with the ability to upload evidence.
- Roll out of Open Portal (24/7 online self-serve for Council Tax, Business Rates, and Benefits).
- Improvements to web pages to provide up to date information and support.

The Revenues and Benefits service is currently looking at procurement of the main system, Open Revenues which is hosted by Civica. Our current contract with Civica expires in October 2020. A number of site visits are being organised to explore other systems (Northgate and Capita).

Eastlaw

Eastlaw continue to focus on service delivery to internal and external clients and income generation for the Council. A key part of the ethos of the service is to provide opportunities to aspiring solicitors and give them a route to qualification and we currently have 5 trainees within the service. Next month will see two members of the team qualifying as solicitors after several years study.
