

## **CABINET MEMBERS REPORT TO COUNCIL**

**24 June 2020**

**COUNCILLOR S BUTIKOFER - CABINET MEMBER FOR STRATEGY & CORPORATE SERVICES (LEGAL, DEMOCRATIC SERVICES & BENEFITS)**

For the period March 2020 to June 2020

### **1 Progress on Portfolio Matters.**

#### **Legal:**

##### Information Governance

NNDC's performance for 19/20 was summarised as follows: 711 requests were received and 673 were responded to within statutory timescales. Resulting in performance of 95% (national target 90%). A 100% performance rate for responding to individual's subject access requests (SARs) of which 14 were received.

#### **Democratic Services:**

The Democratic Services team has been very busy adapting to a new way of working in recent weeks. In the early weeks of the pandemic, two members of the team were re-deployed – one to manage a local co-ordination centre and the other to oversee the Telephone Companion scheme. This left two of the team to implement and support the running of the Council's committee meetings remotely. This has gone well and since the end of March we have held 15 meetings of committees and working parties – including Full Council, Cabinet, Development Committee, Overview & Scrutiny, Governance, Risk & Audit Committee, Employment & Appeals Committee, Licensing sub-committee hearings, Constitution Working Party, North Walsham High Street Action Zone Working Party and Planning Policy & Built Heritage Working Party. Attendance has been very high at all of these meetings. All of the public committee and working party meetings have been livestreamed on the Council's new e-democracy YouTube channel. We are directing the public towards the new channel and views are steadily increasing.

With Members and officers remaining at home since the start of lockdown, the Democratic Services Team has focussed on other ways to keep members informed about key issues. We have been running weekly Member Briefing sessions via Zoom. These have focussed on Council services that have been heavily impacted by the pandemic and officers have shared with Members how they have responded to the challenges that they have faced and outlined how they can support their constituents. Some of the areas

covered include; Benefits and council tax support, business rates grants, homelessness and temporary accommodation, local co-ordination centres, the financial impact of the pandemic on the Council, environmental protection and waste management and collection. All of the sessions have been extremely well attended and we have several more planned for the coming weeks.

**Benefits:**

The Benefits Service responded quickly to the pandemic despite seeing a significant increase to workloads. Over the last 3 months we have received over 900 new claims for benefit, compared to over 400 for the same period the previous year. We have also handled over 20,000 changes in circumstances. The overall number of households claiming benefit is now over 8000, a level we have not seen for over 2 years.

The new online claim form introduced early on in the pandemic is proving very successful and has ensured customers can claim with ease. We have also ensured customers can access the service by phone, email, Webchat or online.

The government announced a number of measures to help people during the Covid-19 outbreak. The changes have been applied to claims and increases in benefit paid out to households. We have also awarded over 3600 households with a payment towards their Council Tax under the Council Tax Hardship Scheme. The scheme is running until the end of March 2021.

**2 Forthcoming Activities and Developments.**

**Legal:**

Eastlaw has responded to the current pandemic situation by developing a triage system for FOI requests, providing a 3 month extension period by which to respond to requests and refusing onerous requests on the basis of costs grounds so as not to divert resources away from dealing with critical areas.

**Democratic Services:**

We are looking to improve and enhance the Member Briefing sessions that we are running, responding to Member feedback on topics that they would like to see covered.

The team will be reviewing some of our more resource- intensive areas and assessing them to see if we could move to an online format. This could include the updating and management of Parish register of interest forms

**Benefits:**

The service is keen to get back to a new business as usual. We will be continuing with our improvements around Customer Service delivery, introducing a new verification policy and risk based reviews, delivering continual training to our team, and increasing risk based checks around quality assurance to ensure we continue to pay benefit correctly and promptly.