

CABINET MEMBERS REPORT TO COUNCIL

18th November 2020

COUNCILLOR GREG HAYMAN - CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING & BENEFITS

For the period September – November 2020

1 Progress on Portfolio Matters.

Benefits

We are seeing an increase in the number of Council Tax Support claims as a result of households suffering from financial hardship throughout the pandemic. However, the impact of Covid-19 is also seeing the number of households claiming Housing Benefit reduce as people migrate onto Universal Credit which includes payment of housing costs. Overall we currently have 7988 households claiming Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Support, compared with 7835 households this time last year.

Since the beginning of April 2020, we have received approx. 41,600 changes in circumstances and 1,500 new claims. Compared to this time last year, this is an increase of 92% in the volume of changes received, and an increase of 45% in the volume of new claims received.

Despite the increase in work, we are continuing to see excellent processing times. The speed of processing target for change of circumstances is 14 days and our current performance is 9 days. The target for new claims is 20 days and our current performance is 17 days.

In recognition of the priorities of the Council and the need to align services to being customer centred, we are continually developing our service to enhance customer service delivery. This has rapidly escalated during the pandemic, to ensure we continue to offer residents access to all our services.

Given the significant increase in the number of new claims, as well as the predicted ongoing effect of the pandemic, we have introduced more online forms, with particular focus around an online claim form. This allows the customer access 24/7 from their own home, using a quick and easy form. We are now seeing more than 90% of our new claims being made through this digital option. The form also automates our back office processing system which reduces the processing time for each new claim.

The service has also widened the contact channels to include Web Chat. The customer can contact the team from their home using their smart phone or tablet, quickly and with ease, without having to directly speak to a member of the team.

Council Tax Hardship Fund

From 1st April 2020, the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) introduced a new support payment to assist those households which had been financially hit by the pandemic. North Norfolk District Council was granted nearly £724,000 to provide households claiming Council Tax Support and on a low income, a lump sum payment of up to £150 towards their Council Tax bill.

So far we have awarded £498,500 of the fund to 4388 households. The scheme is currently due to end on 31st March 2021.

Test and Trace Self-Isolating Payment

From Monday 28th September people across England are required by law to self-isolate if they test positive or are contacted by NHS Test and Trace.

Support is now available through the £500 Test and Trace Support Payment for people on low incomes who are unable to work and have lost income while self-isolating.

Local Authorities are responsible for administering the payment, and the Benefits Team have been asked to lead on this for North Norfolk. All councils were required to have the scheme in place by 12th October.

Since that time our webpages have been continually updated with the latest information, and we have sent out regular social media updates in order to publicise the scheme, encouraging people to self-isolate as appropriate by getting the support they need, to stop the spread of the virus.

Funding of nearly £100k has been provided to North Norfolk DC to introduce and make payments under the scheme. At the time of writing we have received 26 applications of which 10 have been authorised, 11 have been refused as the applicant has not met the criteria, and 5 applications are incomplete.

The scheme is currently due to end on 31st January 2021.

Housing

Green Homes Grant

A consortium of Norfolk Councils, including North Norfolk District, has been successful in securing £1.24 million of Green Homes Grant

The Green Homes Grant will be implemented by the Norfolk Warm Homes Partnership, to help fuel-poor residents to reduce heating costs and improve the energy efficiency of their homes (and thus carbon emissions) by the end of March 2021. Insulation measures available include solid wall insulation, cavity wall insulation, loft insulation, air source heat pumps and underfloor insulation.

Part of the grant funding targets the addition of insulation to Park Home properties. To promote this element of the funding we are writing to residents of the Council owned Park Home site in Pudding Norton to invite applications.

Temporary Housing

The Council has been successful in securing £140,000 from the Government's Next Steps Accommodation Programme, which will provide four homes for single rough sleepers or people at a risk of rough sleeping. The Council will provide £360,000 of match funding. The Council will seek to acquire suitable one-bed homes. The new homes will be in addition to the seven existing homes the Council owns and uses to provide temporary housing.

As at 30th October the Council had 42 households in temporary housing.

New Affordable Homes

Housing Associations working in North Norfolk District expect to provide 225 new affordable homes this financial year – 95 for affordable rent and 130 for shared ownership. Most of the new homes are expected to be completed in the last quarter of the year, with thirty having been completed as at 31 October 2020.

Housing 21's construction of the Fakenham Extra Care Housing scheme is progressing well and should be ready for occupation in March 2021. The sales and letting launch for the 66 flats (36 shared ownership, 30 rented) began this month.

Integrated Housing Adaptations Team (IHAT)

The IHAT has a budget of just under £1.2 million in 20/21 to provide adaptations to help people remain in their homes. The IHAT provide a range of adaptations including level access showers and stair-lifts. Most residents in need of adaptations were also shielding and many contractors were not working during lockdown earlier this year. As a result spend against budget is much lower than hoped for. Most other Norfolk Districts are in the same position. As at September we had spent £244,000 and committed a further £530,000. We expect the situation to improve in the remaining months of the year, though the November lockdown will make things difficult. We hope to be able to carry forward any underspend into 2021/22.

2 Forthcoming Activities and Developments.

HB Award Accuracy Initiative

From 1st April 2021, the DWP are introducing a mandatory initiative called Housing Benefit Award Accuracy. The aim is to identify higher levels of fraud and error in the benefit system through risk based reviews. The DWP will be providing funding under the scheme over the next 4 years. North Norfolk will receive approx. £20,000 for each year the scheme runs.

From this month we will be assessing our readiness position to launch the initiative with focus on system testing, procedures, training, and communications with internal and external stakeholders.

Performance Management

The Benefits Management Team are in the process of improving its system of Performance Management through a defined service delivery plan with set performance measures for each area of delivery. The aim is to support the direction

of the service and measure its successes. InPhase is being developed for Benefits data reporting.

Council Tax Support Scheme

The Council Tax Support Scheme for North Norfolk will be reviewed to align the scheme with recent changes to Housing Benefit legislation and to include changes to the scheme which will minimise the impact of Universal Credit changes on the Council Tax payer. Changes will be put forward to CLT and Members in due course.

3 Meetings attended