

# **Customer Services Members Review Group**

## **Wednesday 17th June 2015, 6:00pm (Vulcan Room)**

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### **Notes**

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**Present:** Councillors: Crawford, Rust, Jones and Vosper  
Ian Harrison, Corporate Director  
Amanda Fahey, Head of Finance  
Andrew Colver, Head of Democratic and Customer Services  
Dawn Kelly, Revenues and Benefits Manager  
Adrian Long, Customer Services Support Officer

#### **Welcome and Apologies**

IH welcomed the group and apologies from Cllr Bell were acknowledged.

#### **Scope of the Group**

IH explained to the Members that following the Organisational re-structure, the Officers attending the group has changed although the purpose of the Group has not fundamentally changed. IH advised that AEC was attending with a "watching brief" tonight, as AEC is now responsible for the CSU.

Cllr. Crawford asked if there was information around "indirect" customers, such as the users of the Lido and Princes Hall.

Cllr. Jones agreed that there should be a corporate expectation of customer service for the Council's external agents

**IH suggested that the group should look at a published standard of customer service as an item for a future meeting.**

#### **Recent Work**

IH reminded the group of the previous one off pieces of work they have been involved in such as: Changes to rates appeals system:- Impact of co-location and customer contact around welfare change.

## **Local Taxation**

### **→ Update on collection rates**

IH presented the end of year collection figures and advised the group that the collection rate has remained steady, despite the increase in the amount due even though most preceptors have frozen the amount of tax due. The increase in value is because of the introduction of residents in receipt of Council Tax Support now having to pay a proportion of their Council Tax. IH said that it is important to move away from just looking at the collection rate and to focus on the amounts both due and the arrears.

Cllr Jones asked if the preceptors shared the amounts that remain uncollected – IH assured him that is the case.

Cllr Vosper asked if the 98.2% was the final figure – IH advised about the recovery taken and confirmed that the majority of Council Tax does get collected (less than 1% ultimately remaining unpaid and written off).

Cllr Crawford asked about the percentage of CTS payers that pay – IH advised that overall there is a lower percentage, but the amount due from payers is considerably smaller.

Cllr Crawford also asked about the Exceptional Hardship Fund and if this is being used – DMK advised that around £7K had been awarded last year.

### **→ Court Costs**

IH informed the group of the recent court case of *Rev. Nicholson v Tottenham Magistrates Court*, when Rev. Nicholson objected to the granting of costs to Haringey Council for obtaining a liability order for non-payment of Council Tax. The case was found in favour of Rev. Nicholson, as Haringey could not justify the level of costs awarded. This judgement has caused local authorities to look at their costs as the Magistrates at future hearings may challenge them. IH showed a detailed breakdown of the costs requested by RBC, which was used as an example at a recent IRRV forum. IH also showed a table of costs charged by other LA's, and RBC appear in the middle of the scale of charges. IH then asked Members for their thoughts on the costs charged by RBC.

Cllr Crawford thought that the whole charging system may be difficult to justify – including the £3 charged for the summons – as most of the process is automated.

Cllr Jones stated that although the final output is automated, there is a lot of work involved to get to that stage.

Cllr Vosper thought the costs were reasonable but asked about the reduced amount charged for CTS as a non-CTS resident who gets charged the full costs could challenge this. IH agreed that it is not supported by the law, other than natural justice, AF advised it was a concession granted by RBC.

DMK advised the group that she is looking to introduce a more pro-active approach before the issuing of court documents.

### **Benefits**

#### **→ Caseload figures (Housing Benefit, Council Tax Support, Jobseekers Allowance & ESA)**

DMK showed that the overall benefit caseload in Rushmoor continues to decrease and has done since March 2013.

DMK said that some of the decrease in JSA claimants can be attributed to sanctions being imposed. She advised that figures could be available on the number of sanctions locally if Members required them.

Cllr Crawford asked if there was a delay in the ESA assessments, hence the gradual increase.

DMK advised that RBC has a relatively low number of ESA claimants compared to the National figure.

#### **→ Speed of Processing Data**

DMK presented the latest speed of processing data released by the DWP, this shows RBC were equal second quickest (alongside Fareham and behind Boston) in the country at processing new claims and changes in circumstances, processed in 5 days and 2 days respectively (22 days and 11 days – Nationally).

#### **→ Real Time Information**

DMK shared some information on the amount of overpayments being identified by RTI and the effect on the workload of the Benefits team. The current system is very labour intensive but the files need to be actioned within 30 days otherwise the overpayment becomes a LA error and the subsidy paid to RBC is reduced. The effect on the amount of debt owed to RBC was also highlighted. There was a general discussion around the publicity surrounding court cases, and although the positive effect was acknowledged because residents are aware of the investigations taking place, the general consensus was that “naming and shaming” is not popular.

AF asked about the effect on team morale as RTI is highlighting errors, but DMK said that there was no negative effect and the team are trying to educate residents about the importance of notifying RBC about any changes to their income.

Cllr Crawford asked if there was any particular difficulties experienced by non-English speaking residents – DMK advised that most of the Nepali residents are not of working age, so are not really affected by RTI.

→ **Universal Credit**

DMK updated members on the latest national situation. Rushmoor is in tranche 4 with an expected go live date of February 2016

→ **Universal Support**

DMK explained that the Local Framework group is still meeting, next date is 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2015

**Post-Election Update**

→ **Queen's Speech**

IH went through some points of the Full Employment & Welfare Benefits Bill and highlighted the potential implications for RBC. The lowering of the Benefit cap will affect some claimants but the exact number is not yet known. Also, the removal of the automatic entitlement to Housing Benefit for 18-21 year olds will have an effect.

→ **Emergency Budget**

IH advised there is speculation about what will be included in the budget on 8<sup>th</sup> July. The already announced Business Rates review is due to be completed by Budget Day 2016

Cllr Jones asked if there was likely to be a review of Council Tax – AF mentioned a Bill that is on its first reading in the House of Lords looking at Council Tax banding for new properties.

**Items for future meetings**

IH listed the items he felt were important for future meetings:

- Response to 8<sup>th</sup> July Emergency Budget measures
- Contact through the Customer Services Unit
- SFIS – Single Fraud Investigation Service
- Future Review of NNDR
- Building the Budget
  - Council Tax Base setting
  - Council Tax Surplus Deficit Account
  - NNDR Surplus Deficit Account
- Member Views

Cllr Crawford requested that information on Customer Satisfaction Surveys be made available.

**Date of next meeting - 1<sup>st</sup> October 2015 – 6pm – Vulcan Room**