



REPORT OF: EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR
RESOURCES

TO: POLICY COUNCIL

ON: 1st DECEMBER 2016

SUBJECT: Revenues and Benefits digitalisation project

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

This report sets out the digital roadmap for the Revenues and Benefits Service, and the proposed policy and procedural changes required to maximise on-line take up by customers, and provide the necessary savings and efficiencies needed to support the financial challenges facing the council.

2. OPTIONS

In order to maximise the customer take up of on-line and self-service options for Council Tax, Business Rates and Housing Benefit, it will be necessary to offer and promote the digital options at all available opportunities.

There are broadly two approaches that can be taken in respect of the promotion and take up of on-line and self-serve services:

1. Offer the online options to customers and allow take up to be incremental, i.e. as and when customers wish to use the digital modules, or;
2. Strongly promote and direct customers to the on-line and self-service modules whenever possible.

In order for the Revenues and Benefits service to deliver the expected workforce review savings, it will be necessary to strongly promote and direct customers away from the traditional contact channels of telephone, face to face and white mail to the more automated and self-service channels.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

To authorise the implementation of all digital modules listed in this report and the appropriate changes to policies and procedures that will ensure maximum customer take up.

4. BACKGROUND

The introduction of new technology across all areas of our lives has fundamentally changed the way in which customers interact with the public sector. The Council, through the Digital Vision document and the three key strategies outlined within it, has

now committed itself to working and delivering services in ways which keep pace with modern technology.

In response to the Digital vision, the Revenues and Benefits Service has now outlined a roadmap to address the challenges of delivering technology and ensuring that the maximum benefit is derived for the Council.

In transferring the Revenues and Benefits service back from Capita, a full review of the system and hosting arrangements was undertaken. After evaluating the options, it was agreed that Northgate would host all of the Revenues and Benefits computer systems. Included in the software licences and hosting arrangement is the availability of a number of digital modules. The digital modules provided by Northgate include:

- Paperless billing;
- On-line Council Tax and Business Rate accounts;
- Landlord portal, and;
- Integrated on-line forms

To deliver the maximum savings from the on-line and self-serve options, the implementation of the modules needs to be accompanied by a fundamental change to how we deal with many customer interactions.

5. RATIONALE

The implementation of the digital solutions for Revenues and Benefits closely follows the agreed vision and strategies outlined and agreed at the Council's Customer Access and Digital Service Board in January 2016.

One key objective included within the digital vision is provision of facilities for residents to access the services and information they need online, and the commitment to a 'Digital First' approach across all Council services, recognising that services should now be delivered in ways which keep pace with modern technology.

The financial climate within which the Council operates is also a significant driver of our approach. As well as enhancing the customer experience, the on-line solutions will reduce waste and duplication that can result from the traditional channels of contact.

The Revenues and Benefits service interacts with more residents and businesses than any other area of the Council and therefore provides an opportunity to digitalise on a large scale, access to information and ways in which contact is made.

6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

As outlined above, in order for the Council to maximise customer take up of on-line/self-service options, and deliver the necessary savings within the department, a number of policies and procedures do require amendment. The proposed changes are outlined below:

Council Tax and Business Rates

The analysis of customer contact for these two areas clearly shows that a substantial amount of customer contact is in respect of simple and straightforward enquiries, for example, the amount outstanding on an account, the band of a property, requests for copy bills etc. The other common area of contact relates to applications or requests for discounts or exemptions. As all of these enquiries can be made via the new on line account, it is recommended that all future customer requests of this type are directed to the on-line account.

It is expected that the majority of interactions with landlords and businesses will be undertaken on-line. Landlords who receive Housing Benefit payments directly to themselves will be required to access an on-line portal for all benefit information and the raising of issues. Similarly, businesses will also be asked to raise all matters via the e-forms or business rate on-line account. All face to face or telephone contact will be limited to repayment issues.

Housing Benefits and Council Tax Support

The Benefits service has already adopted the on-line default position for applications for new claims and changes in circumstances. In order to maximise the savings and efficiencies, the Benefits service would also propose to model the Council Tax and Business Rates approach and inform customers who require simple and straightforward enquiries to access the information on-line.

Whilst the vast majority of residents and customers will be able to engage with the Council digitally, we do appreciate that not all individuals have access to on-line options or the skills required. Where a person does not have access to a PC, tablet or smartphone, advice will be provided on the availability of digital access within the borough, for example in Libraries, Children's Centres etc. For those unable to engage digitally, suggestions will be made to obtain support from family members or friends, or alternatively, seek assistance from Customer Services staff from within the Town Halls.

To provide additional support to customers who use the on-line solutions, webchat will also be available. This service will be advertised on customer documentation and be available via an interactive button which is on display on all Revenues and Benefits web pages.

If there are any individuals who are unable to access the on-line options or one of the Town Halls, appropriate telephone support will still be available. It is expected that the number of customers requiring this type of support will be minimal.

In addition to promoting and directing customers to the on-line solutions, the Council Tax and Business Rates teams will also look to proactively use email addresses previously supplied by customers. Where customers have previously supplied an email address to the office or used it as the primary contact channel, we will target those individuals for sign up of paperless billing/ebilling.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The cost associated with the digital modules mentioned in this report are already included in the Northgate hosting charges, and as a consequence, no further costs will be incurred by the council.

The financial benefits of implementation have been estimated and will be monitored as part of the workforce review.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The modernisation and implementation of on-line and self-service within the Revenues and Benefits service is very much in line with other public sector organisations. The Department of Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenues and Customs, for example, have for a number of years instructed customers to use on-line systems to submit information or engage with the service. The welfare system has also radically changed in recent years with almost all Universal Credit and Pension Credit applications and changes of circumstances submitted on-line.

The comprehensive Equalities Impact Assessment attached to this report has assisted with the decision making and ensured necessary support has been put in place for customers who are unable to use on-line systems or attend the Town Halls.

9. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

The recommendations in this report will reduce the number of customers contacting council staff directly and improve the automation of a number of key processes. As a direct consequence of this, there will be a reduction in resources needed within the service.

10. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken and is attached as Appendix A to this report.

11. CONSULTATIONS

Whilst public consultation has not been sought on this issue, a number of discussions have taken place with key voluntary and charity organisations within the Borough. The digital project and the proposed policy and procedural changes have been discussed with Shelter and Age UK. It has been agreed that both organisations will maintain a close working relationship in order to monitor customer reaction and impact from the digitalisation project.

Chief Officer/Member

Contact Officer: Andy Ormerod
Date:
Background Papers: Digital Vision
Digital Customer Strategy
Appendix A – Equalities Impact Assessment