

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR DIGITAL AND CUSTOMER SERVICES

COUNCILLOR QUESIR MAHMOOD

PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING
CHIEF OFFICERS: Strategic Director
of Resources (SIRO)
Thursday, 24 March 2022

COUNCIL: Delivered by a strong and resilient council;

Resilience and Emergency Planning

The Resilience & Emergency Planning Service (R&EP Service) has remained in place, coordinated with partners, since March 2020 responding to Covid and recently provided support during the Omicron surge. Moving forwards the team will be supporting internally with a post incident review.

Whilst BwD has been in this response mode we have also responded to Storm Arwen, Dudley, Eunice and Electricity Power Outages, water leaks, flooding affecting highways, and building fires with vulnerable residents. Multi Agency teleconferences were stepped up during the storms to support Lancashire response and resources.

We have refreshed the training package to deliver to school improvement groups, to complement the new SLA package from the Resilience Service. This is now live and available to purchase on the Services for Schools website.

Duty Officer Statistics – Quarter 3 2021/2022

Information received	115
Warning total	196
Total:	311
Strategic Officer Activations	1
Duty Officer Activations	11

Digital Strategy

Capital investment for the Digital Strategy was approved at Finance Council in February. This will deliver further transformation through increased use of digital forms for residents, improved back office requesting as well as upgrading the Council's core ICT Network. Procurement is now underway for moving our IT infrastructure to the Cloud and for the introduction of a unified communications platform to replace the legacy telephony system. Work to improve the digital skills of the workforce is underway with a refreshed digital champions scheme to be launched in the spring.

Customer Services

The recruitment of a number of new members of staff is underway and it is hoped that they will be in place by the start of April 2022.

The team are supporting residents through annual Council Tax and Benefits processes, as well as providing support to residents around the national Council Tax rebate initiative, recently announced by the Government.

IT Services

The team continue to support and manage the Council's critical IT systems and infrastructure. Compared to pre-pandemic, levels of demand for IT services and equipment has increased as the Council has adapted and transformed services. With a number of current vacancies, recruitment of specialist technology skills is proving

challenging due to a competitive technology labour market. As a result we have increased activities to train and develop our own staff, including supporting a number of apprentice roles in hard to fill, specialist areas. We have also recently partnered with HOST Skills City to promote specialist technology training opportunities for local people who are unemployed, underemployed and from underrepresented groups, with a launch event hosted in The Making Rooms.

Digital Customer Portal

The final Waste processes have now been successfully moved to the new Digital Customer Portal (DCP). Plans are now in place to decommission the legacy system which is a significant milestone in the DCP project and in maintaining integrity and security of IT systems. We now have 135 total number of resident and business processes live on DCP with 65,608 online customer accounts now live. The second phase of DCP is planned, where we will continue to transform and digitise processes and services.

The Digital team were selected, alongside Cumbria County Council and Kent Fire & Rescue, as one of three national finalists for the IESE UK Public Sector Transformation Awards in the Customer Focus category. Recognised for our work in Service Design and Customer Research, the entry demonstrated the Council's continued progress in delivering improved digital services for residents. We're pleased to announce that BwD picked up the Silver award. This is the second year running that the Digital Team have won a national IESE award, after collecting the Gold prize in 2021 for Digital Transformation.

Business Intelligence

The Business Intelligence team are currently developing a Data Strategy for the Council working with a commercial partner. This will provide a framework for how the Council will use data going forward, with the ultimate aim of increasing proactive interventions to support vulnerable individuals and families. As such, work is continuing to bring new data feeds into our data warehouse, enabling the Council to provide a more consistent view of customer requests and interactions. The team provided significant support to the Council's recent Ofsted inspection in Children's Services.

Information Governance and Security (inc GDPR)

There have been no information assurance incidents warranting referral to the ICO during quarter 3. In the same period we have achieved the minimum requirement for statutory compliance in the following areas;

- Freedom of Information 95.57%
- Environmental Information Regulation 96.58%.
- GDPR/Data Protection Act 2018 Subject Access Requests (SARs) 93.44%
- Mandatory Information Governance Training 97.59%.

The team have increased monitoring and communications around Cyber Security as a result of developments in Russia and Ukraine.

Organisational Development (OD)

The team are currently reviewing the OD & Workforce Strategy with key leads across the organisation. A benchmarking exercise of where the Council is now has been undertaken and the review will take account of what works well in order to refresh and rebrand the OD Strategy.

Key themes have been identified and this includes a review of the culture, behaviour framework and the values. The whole workforce has been engaged to maximise involvement from different departments as part of developing an 'employee voice' group to inform the work.

The employee voice group are currently attending workshops to shape what a revised behaviour and culture framework should look like. Feedback will be taken from the workshops over the next month, which will inform revision of the strategy.

PEOPLE: A good quality of life for all our residents;

Advice Services

The number of customer contacts for debt and welfare benefits advice has increased in the past few months. Debt and Welfare contact is on average up by 10%, in addition, there has also been an increase in the number of housing cases which are up by 7% on previous periods.

A more recent trend has been the number of people who are accessing the service due to fuel poverty. Whilst the initial reason will be listed as fuel poverty, case work invariably uncovers multiple issues being experienced by the clients.

Registrars

To limit unnecessary contact during the pandemic, the process of death registration moved from a face to face appointment, to a telephone call appointment. This change was always seen as a temporary solution, and is due to end on 24th of March 2022. Appropriate updates will be made to the web site to ensure all customers are aware of the change and the new procedure.

In a drive to digitise the service and enhance customer options, an online booking procedure for birth registrations has been developed and tested, with imminent deployment planned . Once this has been completed and there has been a period of live running, it is proposed that death registrations are also offered via the web.

Website Accessibility

Over the past 12 months continual improvement work has been carried out to make the Council's website Blackburn.gov.uk more accessible for residents. Our approaches follow national gov.uk standards and our team is part of a small national network of Council's who are innovating and sharing accessible, open source web design approaches. We have worked with our customer panel in delivering this improved accessibility. Improvements have included better accessibility for people with visual impairment.