

### I. PROGRESS SO FAR

- 1.1. Since the 2018/19 Customer Services Business Plan was written, the department's functions and activities have expanded. This includes some teams moving to the Service Centre that were not anticipated, for example the Land Charges Team. The Coroners' Service now also sits within Customer Services.
- 1.2. Transfer of teams from the Service Centre to Delt progressed in year, including the move of the Payroll and Pensions and HR Systems teams. This was a great example of the strategy to standardise and simplify services through the Service Centre and then share services externally using Delt. The transfer of the Digital Team to Delt has been delayed until 2019/20, in order to ensure that the infrastructure is mature before further services are transferred. The Service Centre continues to explore opportunities for expansion across the Council.
- 1.3. The Customer Services team has been working with the city's debt advisers to develop a dedicated contact route for them to communicate with the revenues and benefits teams, in order to better and more rapidly support financially vulnerable customers. This helps prevent unnecessary debt enforcement activity and ensure that support is available to customers to promote financial stability.
- 1.4. Customer Services Excellence accreditation was retained this year.
- 1.5. A two stage customer complaints process was launched as planned. Member Casework and MP Casework processes are additional pieces of work that were not envisaged at the time the business plan was written, but are being developed as the need was identified in-year.
- 1.6. The Registration Service is proceeding through a restructure which will provide better resilience for the team and the ability to provide services in a more flexible way in future. Following the decision made in December 2017, some refurbishment of the Register Office has progressed to ensure the building is safe and suitable and a new location has been identified for the service. . New registration service software is pending approval and once implemented will enable customers to book and pay for many more services online as well as providing better tools for the team.
- 1.7. The Library Service continues to implement the Plan for Libraries (2017-20) with the new build at St Budeaux underway and plans being finalised for outreach services on the closure of West Park Library.
- 1.8. Three of the pledges made sit with Customer Services as lead:  
*Pledge 63: The refusal of the Government to pause and fix Universal Credit means a faulty system is being rolled out in Plymouth causing misery for many people. We will work with advice agencies and the DWP to ensure that people in the city get the support they need to navigate this complex and broken system.*

Customer Services has delivered Universal Support through a partnership agreement with DWP. This has provided support for customers making applications to UC and budgeting support for UC customers via Advice Plymouth. The work with debt advisers also supports UC customers and ongoing partnership liaison with DWP locally has resulted in PCC Customer Advisers being co-located in both job centres in order to

increase uptake of council tax support and discretionary housing payments as well as providing on the spot general advice and signposting of other council services.

*Pledge 84: The Conservative council has closed libraries all across our city and has downgraded others. This has left Plymouth with a two-tier library service. We will make sure Plymouth's libraries are all first class, and we will ensure that every community has access to a library service*

The service is in regular communication with the Portfolio Holder about usage and activities in all library buildings. All libraries have seen an increase in events and activities offered and the 'exit survey' which took place in June this year shows customer satisfaction has increased year on year at all locations More detailed information on fulfilling the pledge is with the portfolio holder.

*Pledge 85: After the success of Rochdale Council's 'Library Card for every child' initiative we will provide all Year 1 children in Plymouth with a free library card enabling them to take books out from all the City Council's libraries.*

Year 1 pupils in all schools across the city received a special edition library card during October. The distribution of cards coincided with the launch of a new all-year round library challenge for children. The pledge was 'ticked' off on 9 November.

## **2. KEY ACTIONS REMAINING**

- 2.1. The Council Tax Support scheme has been reviewed and is pending approval from Council in January 2018. No material changes are recommended for 2019/20, primarily as the Universal Credit rollout has been postponed.
- 2.2. The Customer Promise was agreed and is being reviewed as part of the work of the Customer Experience Programme
- 2.3. Service Standards were launched and work continues to support their development and wider publication.

## **3. LIKELY AREAS OF FOCUS FOR 2019/20**

- 3.1. Budget pressure has been identified at the outset of the financial year, primarily due to reduced government funding for housing benefit administration. The department's business plan will focus on how to close that budget gap, which is currently predicted as in the region of £330k.
- 3.2. Whilst the managed migration of customers to UC has been paused until at least November 2020, the gateways to housing benefit are closing so there will be fewer customers able to apply for housing benefit from the early part of 2019. The secondary impacts of that could also place financial pressure on PCC and the business plan will need to focus on mitigating those risks. Those secondary impacts could include:
  - reduced demand for council tax support leading to more customers falling into debt and the collection rate falling
  - inability to continue with existing attachments of benefits for housing benefit overpayment, leading to lower collection of outstanding debt
- 3.3. It is anticipated that the Council Tax Support scheme for 2020 and beyond will be completely redesigned, in order to reduce the amount of administration associated with it

and be flexible enough to deal effectively with a mixture of UC and Heritage benefits customers.

- 3.4. The Government proposes to reform the Business Rates rating system by allowing Local Authorities to retain 100% of the Business Rates that they raise locally (rather than receive a Revenue Support Grant). Several LA's are piloting a 100% retention system to provide opportunity to test and gather information on the design of a new system in preparation for 2020/21. The impact of such a system needs to be considered by Customer Services through 19/20.
- 3.5. We anticipate significantly more focus on Digital Channel Shift to mitigate against budget pressures across PCC, as well as to provide better services for customers. This will require resources to shift to the Digital Services team and ensuring the most effective self service solutions are identified and implemented