

Icklesham DC Report July 2018

1. Cabinet Meeting 2nd July 2018, of note:

1.1 Housing benefit - service issues and proposals: one of RDC's key performance indicators is the processing times for housing benefits. Unfortunately, processing times are in the bottom quartile of local authority performance, and within the bottom end of this quartile. The Department for Work and Pensions Performance Development Team (DWP PDT) has been monitoring RDC for the last three years and has 'established a good understanding of the issues facing the service'. Investments during 2017/18 have been made by RDC, but it is too soon to ascertain if these investments have improved the service. In the meantime, DWP PDT is now formally reviewing the service as performance has failed to improve.

The issue is not about the quality of work carried out by officers - this is good. RDC's performance is consistent, but below the national average, for new claims, but has deteriorated for changes in claims. The reasons seem to be fourfold:

- (i) the number of staff - actual deployed staff has been affected by long term sickness and delays in filling vacancies due to the difficulty in recruiting experienced staff. Out of two trainee staff taken on in 2017, one left and the other is on maternity leave. This, as well as other key personnel leaving has created a significant loss of technical knowledge;
- (ii) the volume of work has increased due to the roll out of Universal Credit. RDC now has a new Document Image Processing System (DIP), whereas before a paper based system was in place. From October 2017 to April 2018, over 7,000 notifications were processed - an average of 15 claims per day per officer, which equates to an additional 800 days of work per year. RDC therefore requires 3.5 full-time equivalent staff members to manage the workload;
- (iii) as mentioned above, until very recently, RDC used a paper based system. This had an effect on efficiency and it will be interesting to note the increase in efficiency and management of information once the DIP System has had time to embed - it has already made a significant difference; and
- (iv) complexity - prior to the introduction of Council Tax Reduction (CTR) in 2013, the rules around Housing Benefit and Council Tax were very similar, allowing both benefits to be processed at the same time. But since the introduction of CTR, the rules have continued to diverge every year, making it more complicated for officers and residents and slowing down the assessment of entitlement process.

To improve processing times, RDC needs to implement a number of measures in in the short, medium and long term. These include immediate measures of continuing to train new trainee staff - but take on extra recruits as experience shows that some may not stay on, additional training with other councils and/or outsource, additional support via a Capita Resilience Contract - now in place - which provides additional support to the service by processing work offsite. The DIP went partially live in December 2017 and by October 2018, this will be further integrated allowing process automation where possible. In the medium term, a Performance Management Framework will be established, including targets (I do wonder how 'reward' is given for excellent work), and various reviews aimed to improve processing efficiency and create capacity within the team will be undertaken. A project manager with experience in Housing Benefit is to be appointed (at the cost of up to £75,000). To manage risks, extensive reporting and governance arrangements are to be undertaken.

The CTR Scheme (see 1.2 below) is being reviewed in partnership with ESCC and other East Sussex Boroughs, Districts and precepting authorities. This will make CTR much simpler, reducing the complexity of the claims process and therefore help improve performance all round.

In addition, RDC will investigate and learn from best practice of high performing councils.

RDC's aim is to achieve the national district council average - to be within the top performing councils would require substantial additional investment.

1.2 Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTR) - the current Council Tax Scheme documents are large, means-tested/benefits based and unduly complex. To note, Council Tax Reduction provisions for pensioners are determined by Government, whereas for working age applicants, the scheme is determined by RDC. The intention is to make the new scheme document simpler, reducing complexity and make it more understandable to claimants.

As the current CTR within East Sussex is means-tested the scheme is highly reactive to changes in an individuals circumstances which can alter on a weekly basis; this has led to a significant increase in claims being reassessed and revised demand notices sent out - up to twelve in as many months. It has become apparent that there is a reluctance by residents to make a claim due to the complexity, leading to often vulnerable people losing their benefit. In addition, the rolling out of Universal Credit (UC) has also brought a number of challenges both to the administration of CTR and the collection of Council Tax generally.

Cabinet approved for public consultation the proposed, more modern, changes recommended, in brief; to move to a simpler income banded scheme, where, based on a household's make-up (e.g number of children), the amount of relief will vary depending on their income. Income banding will mean that only significant changes in income will affect the level of discount awarded and Council Tax payers who receive CTR will not receive multiple CT demands and adjustments to their instalments.

There are, however, two groups who would see a reduction in their awards; (i) families with more than two children and (ii) certain disabled applicants or those who have a disabled child. (i) is expected and in line with Government benefits for working age claimants, including Housing Benefit, UC and Tax Credits. In the case of (ii), changes will be made to the scheme to avoid these claimants having a reduction in their awards - RDC is in discussions with software providers to enable changes in the schemes to mitigate this.

In view of above, RDC has, and will continue to have, provisions for taxpayers to make an application for additional discounts where they experience exceptional hardship.

Cabinet also approved the recommendation of giving care leavers 100% CT discount (18-25 years old) - this follows a national campaign by the Children's Society.

The consultation will last 12 weeks and the outcome will be reported to Overview & Scrutiny on 15th October 2018.

1.3 Cabinet approved the writing out of the accounts £133,567.14 (£76,000 Housing Benefit overpayments, £9,790 Council Tax and £47,776 Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates). Only debts under £4,000 can be written out of the accounts without the approval of Cabinet. RDC has robust recovery processes and writing out does not mean that RDC cannot take action in the future to recover a debt if information is received indicating that the amount can be recovered. It is financially prudent to exclude them from the accounts.

1.4 Revised Terms of Reference for the Property Investment Panel were approved, namely from three Executive Councillors (Cabinet) to two and from two Councillors to three.

2. Paul and I attended a Winchelsea Beach Sewage Flooding meeting held by Amber Rudd on 29th June 2018 with key stakeholders, including caravan site owners. This meeting followed the sewage flooding experienced in April and a subsequent email and telephone conversation I had with Joel Hufford of Southern Water.

Southern Water will continue to monitor, survey and seal pipes. It was drawn to Joel's attention that there are issues of sewer flooding throughout the Southern Water region, including towns and cities. Joel confirmed that these problems have always been in existence and that the region has issues with ground water in many areas. Whilst investment into sealing sewers and minimising the amount of groundwater and surface water forcing its way into pipework is ongoing, it is important that everyone involved is doing their bit, including owners of land, particularly those with riparian responsibilities. It is a working together approach which will minimise incidents occurring. Good and efficient water surface drainage is also essential.

It is important that owners of land in Winchelsea Beach which abut ditches are aware of not only their riparian rights, but also their responsibilities. These rights and responsibilities have been established over time at common law; therefore, such rights and responsibilities may not appear on their land title documents (Land Registry). They pass automatically under common law to a new owner of a property upon sale of land. Because there is no express assignment of the rights (and responsibilities) on title deeds, new owners may not be aware of their rights or responsibilities.

In brief, riparian owners can dam or direct watercourses as long as the regular flow of water is not interrupted. Their responsibility is an obligation to make sure that water flows through the land without any 'obstruction, diversion or pollution' which would impact on the rights of other riparian owners. A riparian owner is under no obligation to improve drainage capacity but must not obstruct the flow of water, for example, banks must be kept free of objects, vegetation etc - anything - that impacts on the free flow of water or will lead to an increased flood risk. Riparian owners therefore have an obligation to manage flood risk. Regular maintenance by riparian owners of ditches and banks is a must.

3. Careers in catering and hospitality; the tourism industry. I attended a Rye Business Forum meeting a couple of weeks ago, to talk about tourism and the necessity for growth in this industry. It was great to hear of a new apprenticeship initiative; in association with West Kent College, the Rye Guild for Hospitality is offering one year, Level 2 Apprenticeships in the catering and hospitality field. The paid on-the-job training will be four days per week, with employer-led learning in the workplace to gain important employability skills once a week. Rother District (and beyond) is desperately short of a skilled catering and hospitality workforce - so vital for our tourism and growth in tourism businesses. If you know of anyone who is interested, please contact Martin Blincow at

email mermaidinnadmin@btconnect.com. Several local restaurants and/or hotels are involved with this initiative.

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