

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
FINANCE, INNOVATION and PROPERTY ADVISORY BOARD

15 September 2021

Report of the Director of Finance and Transformation

Part 1- Public

Matters for Information

1 REVENUES AND BENEFITS UPDATE REPORT

A report detailing recent developments in respect of council tax, business rates, council tax reduction and housing benefits.

1.1 Collection of council tax and business rates

- 1.1.1 As at 31 August 2021, the collection rate for council tax stood at 45.71%. For the same period in the year 2020/21, the collection rate was 45.19% (45.95% in 2019/20).
- 1.1.2 As at 31 August 2021, the collection rate for business rates stood at 46%. For the same period in the year 2020/21, the collection rate was 48.07% (48.29% in 2019/20).
- 1.1.3 The collection rate for business rates is quite volatile at present, with many businesses requesting the retail discount awarded from 1 July to be cancelled due to 'cash caps' being exceeded.
- 1.1.4 This has increased the collectible debit, which has an adverse effect on collection. These increased charges will be collected over the remaining monthly instalments, so I am confident the collection rate will improve gradually over the course of this year.
- 1.1.5 Members will note that the number of recovery notices issued this financial year (see ANNEX 1) is considerably higher than last year. This is having a positive effect on our collection rates and is helping to reduce the arrears that were accrued last year.
- 1.1.6 At the time of writing this report, we are still waiting for the Magistrates' Court to schedule another liability order hearing. Until then, the recovery action we can take is limited, so it is encouraging that the collection rates are holding up quite well compared to the previous year.

1.2 Performance and Workload of the Benefits Service

- 1.2.1 New claims for housing benefit and council tax reduction are consistently taking on average around 13 days to process, however most remain dealt with between two and three working days. It is only those few needing further information or clarification where it may take longer.
- 1.2.2 The number of households receiving assistance with housing benefit continues to fall, now standing at 4171. This is a drop of 163 since 1 April 2021 and is primarily due to the numbers switching to Universal Credit. In March 2020 the number of households we helped with housing benefit was down to 4950, 2900 of which were working age, the number of working age claims is now 2222. The rate of fall is slowing.
- 1.2.3 The number of discretionary housing payment applications continues to rise. My Service is looking to develop ways to pro-actively target households identified as at potential risk of hardship using data-matching and analytical software.

1.3 Temporary Accommodation Administration

- 1.3.1 As I reported to the Board at the last meeting, the recovery team within the my Revenues & Benefits Service has taken on work from the Exchequer and Housing Services to enable the end to end billing and recovery of temporary accommodation costs process to be handled by one team. The process has been streamlined, developing the use of IT, to enable the quick and accurate issue of invoices. The work started in March, coinciding with the Service's restructuring and is now bedding in. Those households placed in temporary accommodation by our Housing Service now receive weekly, accurate invoices, by email wherever possible and can simply make contact with an officer for any queries or advice relating to payments. The importance of making this as efficient as possible has become more apparent as numbers have grown in temporary accommodation.

1.4 Self Isolation Payments

- 1.4.1 The self isolation payment support scheme provides a fixed payment of £500 for anyone on a low income instructed to self isolate due to covid contact where the result would be a loss of pay through inability to work.
- 1.4.2 At our last meeting I reported the scheme had recently been extended to parents of children having to self isolate, where the parent could not work, having to stay home to look after a child. Around that time, the number of claims rapidly increased as the Delta Variant took hold, with more and more adults and children having to self isolate.
- 1.4.3 As Members will be aware, on 16 August, a change to self isolation rules took place removing the need for double vaccinated adults, and children under 18 to self isolate through close contact of a person confirmed as Covid positive.

Following that change the number of incoming applications rapidly fell, leaving a backlog of cases, which have gradually been processed.

1.5 Legal Implications

1.5.1 Nil.

1.6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.7 Risk Assessment

1.7.1 Nil.

1.8 Equality Impact Assessment

1.8.1 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users at this point.

1.9 Policy Considerations

1.9.1 Community

1.9.2 Customer Contact

Background papers:

1. In respect of the collection of council tax and business rates, data held within Financial Services.

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