

Cost of Living Response - Scrutiny Review

Customer Services and Digital

Summary

This paper responds to those lines of enquiry that are relevant to the work of Customer Services and the Digital functions.

How has Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) responded to the ongoing cost of living crisis both internally and by working with external partners and agencies?

Customer Services and Digital and Web Teams have responded through the co-ordinated provision of services, promotion and signposting customers. This has been achieved through working in strong partnership with internal Council services and external partners and agencies, particularly colleagues in Libraries and Information, Revenues and Benefits and Fairer Stockton on Tees.

Customer Services

In response to customers who come through via the Customer Contact Centres, Telephone lines and email, Customer Services provide direct support and promote and signpost customers to various support schemes, services and charities as follows:-

- We have worked in partnership with the Money Advise Network to train our Customer Service Advisors to enable us to directly refer customers who would benefit from this advice
- Assisted customers to apply for extra support who are adversely affected by the change to Council Tax support schemes
- Increased support for customers to complete financial statements and make payment arrangements for Council Tax where they are struggling to pay
- Eligibility checks, advice and guidance for Warm Homes Healthy People (Summer and Winter Schemes)
- Provide support and advice regarding Household Support Fund
- Supported customers to obtain the Energy rebate payments
- Promotion and signposting to Warm Spaces (Community Spaces)
- Promotion and guidance for the Big Community Switch
- Promotion of the 'Bread and Butter Thing', including posters in Customer Service Centres
- Promotion of the Infinity Financial Inclusion Leaflet (Available in centres)
- Signposting to the Citizen's Advice Bureau where appropriate
- Signposting to the Stockton on Tees Food Power network
- Signposting and promoting Billingham Town Council food vouchers at Christmas, free meals for children, Period poverty, uniform exchange
- Signposting to the following pages on the Council website
 - Food Insecurity and Poverty Webpage
 - Cost of living support Webpage
 - Fairer Stockton on Tees Webpage

Digital Services

- Development and implementation of online booking solutions for Holidays Are Fun (HAF) working with Children's Services and Catalyst to deliver solutions for providers and parents.
- Development and implementation of online Household Support Fund Solution

- Development and implementation of online sign up solution for Warm Spaces (renamed to community spaces) -
- Development and implementation of a GOSS template to allow search and filtering solution and introduction of mapping to identify locations of Warm Spaces

How has advice and support been communicated to residents and SBC staff?

- KYIT
- Stockton News
- SBC Website
- Cost of living support intranet page
- Cost of living Newsletter
- Social Media
- Communication via Management meetings
- Email signature promotion
- Advertisement boards in town centres
- Seasonal Newsletters

Can this be improved?

- MyCouncil - Newsletter
- Use TVs in Customer Service Centres to promote help and advice
- Targeted messages on phones lines during hold periods

What are the main 'cost of living' issues facing residents? How have these changed over time?

- Change to the Council Tax scheme has impacted on residents
- Rent Increases
- Mortgage increase
- Council Tax increase
- Food
- Energy Bills
- Fuel prices

In what ways has the cost of living crisis impacted on staff retention and recruitment?

- The job role of a Customer Service Advisor has changed significantly since before the pandemic. Staff are supporting more customers with their mental health and financial situations as well as their service enquiry. Call handling times and call wait times have increased as a result.
- Staff sometimes find it difficult to switch off after work often thinking about calls they have dealt with during the day.
- There has been an increase in customers saying they are going to harm themselves.
- We have experienced a high turnover of Customer Services staff who deal with Council Tax, Housing Benefits, Back on Track and Welfare Support. This has had an impact on our capacity to respond to customers and as a result call wait times have increased.

How have SBC staff been supported if they are struggling financially and mentally as a result of the cost of living crisis?

- Staff have been provided with training to help them deal with customers in crisis and distress
- Staff have been signposted to the MIND service and encouraged to attend the Council's personal resilience training
- Staff have been granted additional short breaks to help relieve the pressure of the difficult conversations with customers.

Contact Officer: Lorraine Dixon, Assistant Director – Customer Services and Digital