

Committee: Policy, Resources and Economic Development Committee	Date: 14 September 2022
Subject: Community Engagement Officer	Wards affected: All
Report of: Jacqueline Van Mellaerts, Corporate Director (Finance & Resources) & Section 151 Officer	Public
Report Author: Jacqueline Van Mellaerts, Corporate Director (Finance & Resources) & Section 151 Officer Telephone: 01277 312500 E-mail: jacqueline.vanmellaerts@brentwood.gov.uk	For Decision

Summary

To contribute part time funding for a full time Community Engagement Officer, in order to support Brentwood residents, businesses and communities to be managed by the revenues and benefits partnership. This post will assist and address one of the key actions arising from the cost-of-living crisis action plan.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- R1 Approve to contribute part-time funding for a Community Engagement Officer.**

Main Report

Introduction and Background

1. At Ordinary Council on 27th July the Council recognised the impact of the current cost of living crisis on many residents and groups in Brentwood and there could be further opportunities to enhance the support available.
2. The Council has drafted a response to this crisis in the development of an action plan across both Brentwood and Rochford to support our residents, businesses, and staff. This will involve a mixture of signposting, guidance, and support to the most vulnerable, working in partnership with Essex County Council, health partners and Voluntary and Community organisations.
3. Under Section 101 of the LGFA 1972, amended 2012 (arrangements for discharge of functions by local authorities) Basildon Council provides the strategic and operational delegated functions of Brentwood Borough Councils Revenues and Benefits Service, this includes:
 - Council tax billing, collection and compliance
 - Business rates (NNDR) billing, collection and compliance
 - Housing benefit overpayments sundry debt billing and collection

- Revenues collection customer telephone contact
- Administration and payment of housing benefit, council tax support and discretionary payments
- Housing benefit subsidy, including yearly Revenues & Benefits audits
- Accuracy and appeals
- Systems and controls functions; including maintainance of software licences, contracts and programmes

4. The services makes regular reports through the following

- Joint Brentwood/Basildon Governing Board
- Statutory data is collected in line with statutory deadlines, as set by law, prior to publication these are agreed by Revenues & Benefits Manager and authorised by Brentwood's Section 151 Officer
- Service standards, including performance, are set at yearly joint Brentwood/Basildon Strategic Revenues & Benefits Performance meetings, being monitored at the same meetings quarterly
- All PI's and Formal Complaints are reported to Brentwood's Audit and Scrutiny Committee on a quarterly basis through a Members cross party working group
- Any amendments to Brentwood's Local Council Tax Scheme/Council Tax Reduction Scheme are made by Brentwood Members following consultation

5. Basildon currently employ 2.5 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) Community Engagement Officers, which are solely dedicated to the borough of Basildon. Although the team is managed by the Revenues and Benefits department, the team are not directly attributable to the Revenues and Benefits function and so Basildon provide separate funding for this resource.

Issue, Options and Analysis of Options

6. Brentwood & Basildon senior Officers would like to extend the Community Engagement Team to Brentwood. Basildon currently have a part-time vacancy and Brentwood are looking to contribute funding to increase this vacancy to a full-time post for 2 years, in return of a pool of 3 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) Officers that would work collaboratively across both Brentwood and Basildon authorities.

7. Some of the key functions the established Community Engagement Team undertake are:

- Key technical knowledge on Universal Credit, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Reduction, and Discretionary Housing Payment new claims, which will give assistance for those who genuinely are unable to help themselves.
 - Give advice on Welfare Benefits, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Reduction/Support – ensuring customers are claiming for what they may be entitled to.
 - Assistance with Homelessness and Housing options.
 - Assist in improving customers employability & getting them ready for, or back to work
 - Organise follow up support for specialist issues from different agencies relating to mental health and debts advice
 - Drug and Alcohol dependency support
 - Training to other members of staff within the Council
8. The team have extensive Local Government technical knowledge and work closely with other partners such as DWP, Citizens Advice, Probation Services, Mental Health Unit at Basildon Hospital, Essex County Council's Adult Community Learning, Peabody, local Food Banks & Essential Living Fund, managed by Southend-on-Sea for Essex. They provide assistance with furniture, household furnishings, white goods, clothing and footwear - including School Uniform in exceptional circumstances & general living expenses - such as groceries, nappies, toiletries and fuel.
9. The Community engagement team will assist our existing Community services team, Customer support and reception teams in supporting our Ukrainian guests that have arrived in the Borough under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. They can help provide advice, support and assistance to the sponsors and the guests and establishing any additional financial support, such as claiming housing benefits that they may also be entitled too.
10. We will have a dedicated webpage for our Community Engagement Team which will also feed into the cost-of-living webpage. It will contain a self-referral form that customers are able to complete themselves at any time with an expectation that these referrals are picked up by the team usually within 24-48 hours.

Cost of Living

11. It is envisaged that the team will be a key support during the current cost of living crisis. With soaring energy bills, increased fuel and food prices rising, It is expected that the Community engagement team will provide the much needed support to our Brentwood residents and communities in multiple ways.

- Offering advice and support.
- Signposting to local community groups for the specific needs of individuals/families.
- Advising specific cost of living financial support available, such as household support fund.
- Visual support based at Town Hall and other borough locations.
- Supporting wellbeing and mental health across the borough.
- Additional resource where staff can listen and care for our communities.

12. The community engagement officer appointment is a key outcome of the cost-of-living action plan.

Testimonials

13. Below are a few testimonials that Basildon have received for their existing Community Engagement Team:

- *I'm just writing to say that your help has been overly productive and very helpful I have been in Basildon for nearly 2 years or more and was always sent away even though I mentioned my mental health and I warning difficulties clearing meaning I needed assistance which has now only been given by xxxxx please praise him on him hard work , because his help have taken me a long way and taken a lot of stress off my shoulders, in my opinion he deserves a promotion.*
- *Just wanted to give u a little update. I spoke to you a month or so about becoming homeless in August and you was very helpful with your advice, since then I'm pleased to tell you I successfully bid on a property in billericay, carvers wood and have a self contained flat with a front and back door and tiny seating/patio area! I just wanted to say thankyou for all your helpful advice...I'm so very grateful and happy!*
- *Thank you so much xxx. In amongst all the despair I have felt to date with this process your call made me feel much better.*
- *I know that when Oksana and the boys do finally get here that they will be well supported by you and your team.*
- *Good morning xxxxx, Thank you for your help, Homeseekers have been intouch. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for all the help I have received from you as I couldn't have done it without you, I hope you are recognised for this.*
- *Hello xxxx, Thank you for the time you spent with Eloise on the telephone earlier today. Although she shed some tears, she felt your conversation was helpful and she is hopeful of some positives outcomes. She was grateful that you did not judge her in anyway and she actually felt you heard her. Thanks again.*
- *.....xxxx you have not only made me realise I have to open letters and face my fears as it's not always as bad as you think, there needs to be more xxxx to deal with*

people like myself, not only has he sorted my council tax his made me face a lot about myself and my life. once again Thankyou so much.

- *Rom the Team: I just wanted to shine some light on the positive outcome for xxxx.. When he first approached, he was street homeless and sofa surfing, he has a range of mental health problems, and he was really in a bad place. When I spoke to him, we had a long chat about getting his housing sorted and getting him back into work and also getting support for his mental health. I have called him today and he has advised he is starting a full-time job tomorrow at pound stretchers and has arranged with his friend to sofa surf there so he can save up to pay off his debts and save to buy a house. Worst case scenario he has the capital to private rent, and he is also getting help with his mental health. xxxx has turned himself around very quick and whilst I clearly can't take the credit for his efforts he has stated if I didn't contact him, he wouldn't of went for the job in the first place. I see this as a massive positive and all it took was a little encouragement and advice.*

Reasons for Recommendation

14. To support our residents, businesses, and staff through the current cost of living crisis to provide guidance, signposting to support services and assistance by recruiting to a community engagement officer.

Consultation

15. None

References to Corporate Strategy

16. Providing support for all residents, focusing on equality, understanding and respect, and ensuring we maintain delivering efficient and effective services.

Implications

Financial Implications

Name & Title: Jacqueline Van Mellaerts, Corporate Director (Finance & Resources) & Section 151 Officer

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17. Basildon will be the recruiting employer for a full time officer, of which Brentwood will contribute costs for a part-time resource. The 2 year FTE post at Basildon will be a level 5, which at top of band is approximately £27,514. With oncosts the total approximate cost required to fund the part time resource will be £36,500 over two years.

18. Resource is available within the Revenues and Benefits existing budgets in order to fund the part-time resource for 2 years.

19. The additional advice and support the community engagement officers can provide, has the opportunity to also drive down rent arrears, and increase Council Tax collection rates, thus having an indirect positive financial impact on the collection fund and therefore for the Council.

Legal Implications

Name & Title: Steve Summers, Strategic Director & Monitoring Officer

Tel & Email: 01277 312500/steve.summers@brentwood.rochford.gov.uk

20. There are no direct legal implications arising from this report

Economic Implications

Name & Title: Phil Drane, Director of Place

Tel & Email: 01277 312500/philip.drane@brentwood.rochford.gov.uk

21. Effective community engagement can have indirect benefits for the local economy.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Name & Title: Kim Anderson, Corporate Manager Communities, Leisure and Health

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22. The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:

- a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful
- b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not include tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

23. The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, gender, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).

24. The proposals in this report will not have a disproportionate adverse impact on any people with a particular characteristic and will provide positive benefits

to some of these groups to maximise support for community projects and initiatives.

Other Implications (where significant) – i.e. Health and Safety, Asset Management, Equality and Diversity, Risk Management, Section 17 – Crime & Disorder, Sustainability, ICT.

25. None

Background papers

None

Appendices to this report

None