

Cabinet Member Briefing – The Customer Engagement Portfolio



Our Customer Strategy (2021 – 2026) set out ambition that:

“We want to do things right, first time, every time, and make services accessible, to help reduce inequalities and maximise potential”.

I am very proud to tell you about all the brilliant work the team and I have done this year, to help bring us closer to realising that vision for our residents.

Our Service Delivery

Walsall Connected

This year saw the successful launch of our new flagship Walsall Connected service, which consists of a network of 7 community libraries, and 19 voluntary and community partnership sites, who now offer our residents support, and digital assistance, to access first-line Council services, while at the same time, teaching them to gain everyday digital skills, that will help them to do many other things on-line independently in the future. Since July 2022, a total of 4328 individuals have received support, with 90% of all customer queries now being dealt with at the first point of contact. Perhaps more impressive, is the fact that from these customers, 62% said that they would feel confident to do the same process themselves on-line next time and 100% stating that they would recommend the service to family and friends.

All Walsall Connected sites are also ideally placed to help signpost residents into a wide range of other community-based services, such as befriending, crafting and friendship clubs, community events, mother and toddler groups, health and wellbeing services, neighbourhood watch and many others, helping to ensure that no-one in our community feels isolated, or alone.



Customer Experience Centre (CXC)

The Customer Experience Centre has expanded over the last 12 months to incorporate other service areas. This supports the CXC aims of centralising low to medium level customer contact across the council whilst ensuring our customers receive consistently excellent service when they contact the council. As more services join the CXC in the coming months this will help align our ways of working, the call quality assurance, reduce call abandonment and wait times of all services as they move into the CXC operating model.

Building Control transferred to the CXC in April 2022 and initially in excess of 30% of calls were supported by the service area, this has now reduced to 7%. This has been supported by enabling the team to undertake the LABC qualification.

In 2023 School admissions and appeals transferred to CXC. We witnessed a phenomenal success with a staggering 97% of calls answered resulting in a 19% increase in the previous year and a 24% decrease in abandoned calls with an average answering speed of 36 seconds an improvement on the previous year by 2 minutes 49 seconds.

Over the last 12 months we have seen the number of transactions increase via 'My Account' self-service portal with 49.1% of customers choosing to transact online using the portal for those processes available on the new CRM system. We have a total number of 25,721 customer who have created accounts via 'My Account'



Benefits Service

The benefits service supports the boroughs residents with Housing Benefit, Council Tax Reduction and Discretionary Housing Payments providing vital support to vulnerable residents. The team this year received over 20,000 telephone calls, supporting residents with benefits and housing support fund enquiries delivering expertise and knowledge to solve issues at first point of contact.

This year the team issued Housing Benefit payments totalling over 60 million pounds and Discretionary Housing Payments of over 1 million. The Discretionary Housing Payment have supported nearly 1100 households providing extra support to meet housing costs, reducing the demands placed on other Council services.

Council Tax Reduction is provided to nearly 28,000 households reducing Council Tax for eligible households, in addition Council Tax Reduction Hardship payments are made to further support the most vulnerable.

The teams number of days to process new applications (average from Jan 2023 – March 2023) is currently 14 days and 3 days to process change in circumstances, both are below national average confirmed in Quarter 2 of 2022 – 2023 of 21 days for new applications and 9 days for changes indicating the level of service provided within this team.

Housing Standards



Adaptation Assistance

To date this year the team has approved 515 adaptation applications for disabled residents and over 485 adaptation schemes have been fully completed. Cabinet approved an updated Housing Renewal Assistance Policy which has further streamlined the service, which offers a flexible approach to helping residents to stay safe, and well, living in their own homes. Last Year the service was recognised as being one of the most flexible in England, by offering financial support of up to £45,000, in some specific cases.

Improving Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs) for Homes

This year our team has been helping to tackle fuel poverty, by working with private landlords, to ensure they are aware of relevant legislation and improve the standard of rented homes. This work has resulted in 59 new or improved EPC's in the borough. Under the rules, properties are given EPC ratings from A (best) to F and G (worst) (with later not being allowed to be rented out privately).

Local Authority Delivery (LAD) & Home Upgrade Grant (HUG) Schemes

The team successfully bid and secured funds through the Local Authority Delivery Scheme (LAD) which aims to raise the energy efficiency of low-income and low EPC rated homes (those with Band E, F or G) including those living in the worst quality off-gas grid homes, delivering progress towards reducing fuel poverty, the phasing out the installation of high carbon fossil fuel heating and the UK's commitment to net zero by 2050. In the last twelve months the Council has facilitated the following through this scheme:

- 119 homes securing external wall insulation.
- 32 homes securing loft insulation.
- 3 homes securing cavity wall insulation.
- 326 homes securing solar PV panels to enable them to undertake micro-generation of energy.

Further funds were also secured for round 3 of LADs, and works are now being delivered to help more households in Walsall with this new round of funding. In addition to the above, the Council also secured HUGs round 1 and 2 funding to help households on low incomes, who are living in energy efficiency homes and do not have gas as a source of home heating.

Warm Homes and Social Housing Decarbonisation

Funding was secured from the National Grid charity to provide first time central heating for a range of vulnerable households including:

- 48 Residential Park homes
- 47 Social housing / owner occupied homes

One of the largest single awards of funding nationally was secured to assist Watmos to retrofit 858 homes and that scheme is now underway, and due to complete in spring 2023.

Improving Standards and Tackling Empty Homes

The service received 589 enquiries about housing standards and 136 of these warranted follow-up property inspections. In most cases landlords complied with requests to improve properties but statutory action was required in others. The council takes a robust stance against rogue landlords. In 2022 the Service issued a range of statutory notices including 22 Improvement Notices (4 of which were for the highest category of hazards) and 2 prohibition orders of which 1 was an emergency prohibition order. The team also issued a total of 6 Civil Penalty fines against landlords who had either failed to complete works required by Improvement Notices or to licence their HMO property and these fines were to the value of £42,000. This is ring fenced towards enforcement action. To ensure continued partnership working and clear responsibilities for work, the council has re-signed the updated Joint protocol with West Midlands Fire and Rescue. After long-term empty homeowners did not heed officer advice, the service sought authority from the Planning Inspectorate for Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO). These CPOs were confirmed by the Inspectorate for 5 dwellings in 2022. The properties are to be refurbished and used for future supported housing purposes.

Houses in Multiple Occupation Additional Licensing Scheme Launched

Following comprehensive statutory consultation, the first area of the borough for Additional Licensing of house in multiple occupation launched in September 2022. This licensing scheme covers 4 wards and includes all private rented HMOs that have 3 or more tenants from more than 1 household. Consultation on a second scheme covering 5 further wards was completed in 2022 and this was approved by cabinet for launch later in 2023.



Housing and Welfare Services

Homeless prevention

The Rough Sleepers Initiative team continues to be pro-active within the borough which has significantly contributed to the low numbers of rough sleepers in Walsall. The team carry out bi-monthly night counts which has seen numbers of rough sleeping significantly reducing. In 2016 our numbers of rough sleepers was 26, as of January 2023 our number was 1. Our Winter Night Provision started 31st October 2022 and runs until the end of March 2023. To date 19 individuals have been accommodated under SWEP. All of which have been proactively supported with 17 individuals being successful accommodated. Due to the ongoing success of the team further funding has been awarded by Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities for 2023-25 amounting to £1.2m.

Change into Action (CIA) has been re-launched to support rough sleepers via voluntary donations from the public. This is an alternative giving scheme which provides a different option to giving to 'street beggars' donations can be made via a number of pay portals. To date we have received donations in excess of £12,000.00. These funds can be accessed by charities and partner agencies to provide additional support for those who have had a history of rough sleeping or who are at risk of rough sleeping.

Housing and Welfare Services continue to strive in preventing homelessness and Walsall continues to maintain a prevention rate above the national average.

New Arrivals and Migrant Resettlement

The Council and its partners have housed and supported 116 **Afghans** since 2021. The families have integrated well. We have also welcomed 92 individuals through the **Homes for Ukraine scheme**, of which 72 still remain in Walsall. This has included the Council carrying out safeguarding checks, property inspections and commissioned support for both hosts and guests.

Help for the Rough Sleepers and Vulnerable Homeless People

Housing First places homeless people directly into long-term, self-contained housing with no requirement that they progress through transitional housing programmes, such as hostels, shared housing, or time limited tenancies based on special conditions. In 2022, the team secured a further £800,000 (on top of the earlier £1.5 million secured) for the next 3 years to support via **Housing First** 50 former rough sleepers. The scheme has initially supported 103 individuals with:

- 26 graduating to independent living
- 78 having received addiction treatment - 16 have overcome their addictions
- 69 have accessed mental health services
- 11 have engaged in either training or employment

In addition, we have also secured £160,000 to appoint a liaison officer to help source homes for ex-offenders and support them to sustain their tenancies. We have remodelled and recommissioned our domestic abuse refuge service, with a smaller refuge block and more dispersed units of assorted sizes. This is helping us deliver better outcomes for victims, and to help a broader range of households including females, males, households with older children, and LGBT+. At the end of 2022, the government also awarded us £315,000 for the next two years to improve exempt accommodation (shared and supported housing) through the **Supported Housing Improvement Programme**. We will be inspecting accommodation to ensure it meets proper standards and conducting support assessments ensuring residents are actually receiving the support levels that they require.

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Further Grant support

Household Support Fund

Walsall are providing assistance to the Borough's most vulnerable residents using the Household Support Fund in a number of different ways. We are providing support, in the form of direct payments, to all households with children and pensioner households that are in receipt of council tax support. This scheme provides direct assistance to the most financial vulnerable households. Funding has also been allocated to increase the assistance that can be offered to residents in the borough through local food banks and local partner organisations as well as helping with match funding contributions for replacement boilers. In addition, the council is using the Household Support Fund to increase the assistance available through the Walsall Crisis Support Scheme and Discretionary Housing Payments. In 2022 there was over 59,500 individual awards from the household support fund totalling over £6m worth of assistance with £5.6m of further grant funding secured for 2023 .

Council Tax Energy Rebate

In 2022 the council administered the governments Council Tax Energy Rebate scheme. The core scheme awarded £150 to all those with their main residence in a Band A-D property, or B and E and entitled to disabled band reduction. There was also a discretionary scheme where the council gave a top up to the core scheme for those households in receipt of council tax

reduction and awards to households in Band E-H that either were in receipt of council tax reduction or able to evidence hardship due to the rise in energy costs. The council made over 104,000 payments worth £15.6m under the core scheme and £735k worth of payments under the discretionary scheme to over 27,500 households.

Thank you

I would like to take this opportunity to share with Council, my thanks for the considerable contribution and efforts made our staff, our partners and our communities.

The services within the Customer Engagement Directorate have worked hard over the last 12 months delivering services to our residents, and putting the customer at the heart of everything we do. This report has shared a number of successful initiatives introduced within the service, which has been developed and adopted by both the Council, and partner organisations. This has required us to work in a collaborative way, to both co-design and deliver services to benefit the customer. Our journey does not end here. Customer Engagement strives to continually improve our customer experience.



Councillor Gaz Ali
Portfolio Holder for Customer
17th April 2023