

Councillor Chris Holley
Convener,
Service Improvement and Finance
Scrutiny Performance Panel

Please ask for: Councillor Rob Stewart
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Our Ref: RS/JW
Your Ref:
Date: 17 February 2023

Dear Councillor Holley

Thank you for your letter dated 2 February 2023.

In response to your query on reassurance that the Housing Benefits Team are not adversely affected by the loss of staff in addition to staff being diverted to processing Covid and other Welsh Government grants. I respond as follows.

The Authority's Housing Benefits Team is part of the wider Revenues and Benefits Service which, in addition to administering and paying Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction, is also responsible for collection of Council Tax & Business Rates, determining eligibility for Free School Meals, School Uniform Grants and our Passport to Leisure Scheme. In addition, the service undertakes financial assessments of service users' contribution towards the cost of their social care, collection of that contribution, makes payments to residential and domiciliary care providers and pays direct payments and childcare payments on behalf of social services. Due to the technical nature of its role, the service also provides its own customer services function over the telephone, skype/teams, by e-mail and face to face in the contact centre.

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the service has become almost the 'deliverer of choice' for the various Welsh Government grants that have been made available and is now starting delivery of 2 further fuel grants on behalf of the UK government which is already proving to be challenging.

All staff in the service have come together to deliver what was required at pace, and often at short notice. One of the strengths of this service is the great teamwork between colleagues who will always support each other and our citizens to complete complex tasks in good time.

The following payments have been managed on behalf of Welsh Government:

- Over 9,800 grants to a value of £94,000,000 were paid to Swansea Businesses to support them through the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Nearly 16,000 applications for Covid-19 Self-Isolation grants were processed resulting in nearly 3,500 payments worth over £6,500,000 to citizens on a low income, which enabled them to self-isolate and keep safe from Covid-19.
- Over 4,500 applications for the Unpaid Carers Recognition payment were dealt with, paying £1,726,500 to those who care for our most vulnerable.
- For the last winter fuel scheme, over 18,100 fuel grants were processed and £2,761,200 was paid to eligible Swansea residents.
- The current winter fuel scheme is still underway and to date £5,315,800 has been paid to 26,579 eligible households.
- Under the auspices of the Cost-of-Living Payment scheme, over £12,985,000 has been paid so far and as we head towards the end of the scheme in March 2023, further payments are now going to be made to the most vulnerable as Cabinet has just approved some additional eligibility criteria.

All of this has been achieved with only a small temporary increase in customer services staff.

It is clear the service has been impacted by the additional payments it has been required to deliver over the period, as indeed have colleagues in similar roles in other local authorities. This was to be expected. In addition, the loss of experienced staff has also not helped the position.

In mitigation, although we still have 2 grant schemes underway but due to close, and two new ones about to commence, additional claim processing staff have recently been appointed and are currently in the middle of their initial training period. Once this has been completed, they will begin to assist with the work to reduce processing times. However, and again as we would expect and as you are already aware, it will be some time before new staff can process complex benefit claims as quickly as the experienced staff the section has recently lost. They will be provided with mentoring and support to achieve the required performance levels as quickly as possible.

The employment of the temporary customer services staff has been extended until June 2023 and this will be further reviewed with the requirements of the 2 additional grant schemes about to commence in mind.

Although the Housing Benefits Team has been adversely affected by the loss of experienced staff and by having to deal with Covid-19 and other Welsh Government / UK Government grants, I can assure you that all necessary action possible within the available resources is being taken to mitigate that impact.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Rob Stewart', with a stylized, flowing script.

**Y CYNGHORYDD/COUNCILLOR ROB STEWART
ARWEINYDD/LEADER**