

CABINET STATEMENT

CABINET MEMBER FOR REGENERATION (NORTH) – COUNCILLOR BICKNELL

Due to Covid it has not been possible to make the following announcement earlier, so I wanted to open by taking this opportunity to officially announce and give a very warm welcome to Debra Clothier as the new CEO of One Community who started her role on 16 August.

I'm sure everyone, along with myself, would like to wish Debra every success in the coming years in her new role.

Lastly, so that it is officially recorded, I wanted to publicly thank Jean Robert-Jones. As I'm pretty sure you all know Jean was the CEO of One Community, a role Jean held for 10 years until her retirement. Jean was a champion for the voluntary sector, not just in Eastleigh but the wider area too. I spoke to Jean before her retirement and asked what she was going to do. The answer was to become a volunteer on the ground and be on the other side for a change. Like I said, Jean was a champion for the volunteering sector.

So, thank you Jean for your 10 years of service and all the people and organisations you have helped, and enjoy your retirement.

With life returning some form of normality, both One Community and Eastleigh Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) have been able to actively see more people. In the case of One Community their highlight has been the resumption of attending events such as the Mela, Eastleigh Pride and Eastleigh Unwrapped. Their monthly library outreach service resumed in July alongside their Flourish Volunteer Centre drop-ins on the last Thursday of the month. Also, as well as continuing to staff the Museum, One Community has held their Volunteering Centre Drop-ins on the second Wednesday of the month.

One Community's Covid response work has now ceased and will hopefully not be needed again. In that time, over 100 volunteers supported this work across the Borough and a number of volunteers have been re-engaged into other long-term volunteering roles. Huge thanks must be given to all those volunteers and One Community.

While CAB may not be quite as visible, their work is equally as important. During the pandemic all consultations were done via Teams/ Zoom. This is continuing but alongside the more traditional face-to-face meetings as CAB have adopted a flexible approach to suit residents needs and requirements, as well as protecting the volunteers.

Their 3 Outreach venues have been open since April, but footfall has been low. However, this is now picking up with Hamble and Bursledon being well attended but Hedge End being less so.

Overall, CAB saw a large increase in people needing help in Q2 (July, August & September), up 300 from Q1 (April, May, June) and, due to the ending of the furlough scheme, a further spike is expected for Q3. This is especially in relation to employment where up until now levels have been almost back-to-normal.

Although life is returning to “normal”, other harsh realities are appearing. The most worrying being debt and benefit issues which had been suppressed during the pandemic. In Q2 there was an extra 200 queries regarding benefits, and debt issues saw a 188% increase from Q1. CAB are recruiting more debt advisors in anticipation of further increases in this service.

Regarding benefits, and especially Universal Credit (UC), CAB assist with the Help to Claim Service (HTC). The HTC is now in its third year, and this quarter assisted 89 Eastleigh clients to apply for UC for the first time, up again on figures from earlier quarters (219 Eastleigh people were helped by this project over 20-21). The HTC project provides information, advice, and support to new UC claimants up until they receive their first payment.

While the economic impact of the pandemic may be receding and having less of an effect on residents spending powers, other factors are now impacting harder. We have the rising cost of living as the effects of Brexit are being laid bare, increased gas and heating costs, the increase in national insurance contributions to come, and possible implications following the recent budget. With a high skilled, high wage economy a very long way off, the situation with benefits and debt is not one that is expected to recede quickly. As such, I will endeavour to keep Council updated on this important matter which does give a snapshot of the reality of life in our Borough.

On a more uplifting note, I'm pleased to report that we have approved 46 and completed 35 Disability Facilities Grants which is 21% up on the same period last year. These are invaluable to those that apply and are successful and is a credit to this administration that we top the Government funding up to the level we do, enabling the Council to provide such a good service.

I would like to finish up by touching on homelessness. I am sure many have noticed an increase in people sleeping rough in Eastleigh. This may be due to the recent approach by the new administration in Southampton towards homeless people which has encourage some to move to Eastleigh. I would like to give Council reassurance that we are working closely with all our partners to ensure there are pathways out of homelessness for those that are rough sleeping. Obviously, I can't comment on specific cases, but we are doing everything we can to provide assistance in what are complex cases.