

**Councillor Richard Freeman,**

**Portfolio Holder for Council and Public Services**

**Full Council, 5 October 2021**

### **COUNCIL SERVICES:**

The clue, as they say, is in the name. I am sometimes contacted by members of the public who are having difficulty getting the service they require from our council. Dealing with complaints is an invaluable way to discover where we could, and sometimes should, 'do better'.

One which occurred recently involved an agéd resident, a council tenant, with a defective boiler. Several attempts had been made to fix the problem, but all produced only a short-term solution. Various internal protocols complicate what we could do. The simplest solution would be simply to fit a new boiler, but it wasn't quite old enough to qualify for replacement. Our resident had reached the point where the system needed a manual reboot every day before it would function and was about to take up the matter with the Ombudsman.

Fortunately, a telephone call by my colleague Cllr. Coote (who has a particular interest in social housing) resulted in immediate and satisfactory action. Well done Arthur! Despite being one of the Ward councillors, I was unaware of this issue which had been on-going for six months. When the resident contacted me we fixed it quickly, but we need to build a system whereby situations such as these are visible to the ward councillors and are promptly fixed.

### **CAR PARKING TICKET MACHINES:**

We have an on-going issue in our car parks with ticket machines which use cash. Basically, they are regularly broken into, lots of money is stolen, and the machines cost up to £1k to repair – if we can get the parts. As a result, we took the decision to replace all except one ticket machine in Swan Meadow, Saffron Walden, with card and smartphone-operated machines. This seemingly sensible alternative simply resulted in the remaining cash machined being robbed a few days ago! This was shortly followed by the cash-operated machine in The Common car park

The attrition rate of our cash-operated ticket machines is becoming unsustainable. Since April around £6.5k in cash has been stolen. The damage costs around £1k per machine to repair (and spares are increasingly difficult to obtain).

In car parks where the ticket machines were cash-operated we must allow free parking if they are all disabled.

As a result, I have authorized the replacement of our older cash-operated machines (which we have found are the target for being robbed). Their replacements accept payment by credit or bank card, or the MiPermit system (which is an app operating on a smartphone).

We are keeping the situation under review. Ideally, we would like to continue to offer the public the choice of using cash for parking, but the losses and the cost of damage to our machines mean that only a few locations appear not to suffer from robberies.

## **THE FORMER DAY CENTRES:**

The re-imagined day centre in Stansted will hopefully recommence its activities shortly. Their Parish Council has applied for a grant from Uttlesford which will contribute to their providing a much wider range of services to a demographic covering the whole of its community. It will be run by a local management team, independent of the District Council.

We are hopeful of a similar outcome for Thaxted and Saffron Walden. They will offer a mix of offerings, decided locally by their individual management teams.

The Rowena Davey Centre at Great Dunmow has continued throughout Covid to provide some level of service to its community, within the rules and limitations imposed by the restrictions. As these relax, it is expected continue to provide an expanded service which will take account of local needs, as identified by its local management.

In all cases, the new Community Hubs will be encouraged to provide a wide range of services to the widest possible demographic, in a comfortable, safe and attractive environment.

## **CUSTOMER SERVICES:**

Our new telephone system is about to acquire a 'Live Chat' function. It will enable our public to deal more easily with their issues by phone, avoiding the need for a visit to our London Road offices. Our reception area is now open with a restricted service, but it seems that over the Covid period people got used to doing more things 'remotely'. We are a rural district, and the ability to deal with an issue by phone or email has attractions for many.

Officers are also being assisted by a "transformation" specialist in designing our Council Services for the future. This will involve on-going consultation with the public, with the purpose of improving our services and not introducing change just for its own sake.

Thanks to Paula Evans and Richard Auty for making this happen, and for their forbearance and professionalism over the period when the pandemic was at its worst. Well done!

Cllr Richard Freeman

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