

NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL

**EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM'S
REPORT TO**

Cabinet
13 October 2021

Report Title: Northgate One Front Door Additional Revenues and Benefits Modules

Submitted by: Head of Customer and Digital Services

Portfolios: Finance, Town Centres Growth

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Purpose of the Report

The report seeks Cabinet approval to procure additional modules to the Northgate Revenues and Benefits applications necessary to support the Council's One Front Door approach within the One Council Project.

Recommendation

That this request be approved on the grounds of staff efficiencies and providing a better service to the public.

Reasons

This is part of the One Council / One Front Door project to enhance public access to Council Services on a 24/7 basis.

1. **Background**

- 1.1 Traditionally Revenues and Benefits have been a phone or face to face contact service, over recent years this has moved to a more digital / on line service linked to the Council's website.
- 1.2 With the Council's investment in the One Council project and One Front Door process plus the investment and development of a new Council website this all leads to a more digital and online provision of Council Services. Revenues and Benefits applications are a critical public service provided by the Council which will benefit from a strong online presence.
- 1.3 The Council currently has Citizen Access – Rates (CA-R) which allows customers to manage their council tax account.

2. **Issues**

- 2.1 Currently our provision for self service is limited to just Council Tax. The public would need to apply for benefits either through phoning our customer services agents or physically calling into Castle House / Kidsgrove Town Hall. These two options both require time with our customer service agents, in a service area that is already stretched.
- 2.2 This requirement for a customer service agent to interact with the end user also limits the individual with regards to only being able to manage their claim during normal office working hours.

3. Proposal

- 3.1 Northgate currently provide the Council with the Citizen Access – Rates (CA-R) solution, which allows customers to manage their Council Tax account online.
- 3.2 The proposal within this report provide our customers with the ability to manage not only their council tax account, but also their benefit application in one simple solution. In order to facilitate this, two new modules of Citizens Access would need to be purchased. These include Citizens Access – Benefits (CA-B) and Citizens Access – Full Case Reviews (CA-FCR).
- 3.3 CA-B provides the public with online access to:
- make new benefits claims;
 - inform the Council of any changes in circumstances; and
 - increase the automation of applications / amendments.
- 3.4 CA-FCR combines an online form with enhanced functionality for the Revenues and Benefits service. This online form provides:
- the facility to easily and securely upload DWP's high risk files;
 - the ability to automatically send appropriate claimants a link to the review form as well as a unique reference key to facilitate authentication;
 - pre-populate each form, so claimants need only agree or amend each section;
 - take completed forms straight into NEC Revenues and Benefits for final checks and then re-calculation; and
 - issue reminders and suspend HB awards if no response is received to the initial communication.
- 3.5 Within the proposal there will be many benefits from the new modules including:
- Implementation of benefits self-service to reduce staff processing time;
 - Allowing a customer to complete a benefits full case review of their benefit case online;
 - Increased automation of routine tasks;
 - Reduced customer contact time and personal visits required to Castle House;
 - Service availability outside normal working hours; and
 - Direct integration with our Revenues and Benefits system from the website.
- 3.6 All the above tie in with the One Front Door principles and the Council's vision to promote self-service via a redesigned website with enhanced features that will allow our customers to be in control of their own account removing the dependency and limitations of contacting customer services.
- 3.7 The increase in self-service will lead to a reduction in calls and the physical presence within Castle House/ Kidsgrove Town Hall. The service is already under pressure and enabling our customers to self-serve will reduce this pressure on the service.
- 3.8 By facilitating our customers to utilise self-service this will enable them to use a 24/7 service as and when required.
- 3.9 Through enabling a self-service approach for customers, this will release staff resource to undertake less administrative tasks. It is estimated that currently there is the equivalent of 3 FTE's undertaking the processes that can be streamlined and automated through the addition of both the CA-B and CA-FCR solutions.

4. **Reasons for Proposed Solution**

- 4.1 One Front Door has been developed to enhance the customer interaction with the council. The demand for 24/7 access to complete routine transactions without interaction has become the new normal.
- 4.2 We currently have Citizen Access – Rates (CA-R) which allows our customers to manage their council tax and this proposal would provide our customers the ability to manage their benefits and council tax in one simple solution.
- 4.3 There are a number of benefits for the Council in utilising this solution:
- Staff efficiencies by not having to complete time intensive forms;
 - Ability to better deploy Revenues and Benefits staff on essential workloads;
 - Provide a quick and efficient service to the public; and
 - Ability for the public to submit claims and forms 24/7.

5. **Options Considered**

- 5.1 Keep the current work flow and working practices for Revenues and Benefits staff:
- No increase to staff efficiencies.
 - Customers will not be able to access the full range of online options.
 - Customers will still need to contact customer services for benefits claims.
 - Mismatched online options
- 5.2 Accept the proposal and progress with the One Front Door / digital website forms solution.

6. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

- 6.1 The use of the CCS Data and Application Solutions (DAS) RM3821 framework offers a compliant procurement option in line with current legislation (Public Contract Regulations 2015 (PCR2015) and the Council's governance procedures and as such will minimise the risk to the Council of a procurement challenge.

7. **Equality Impact Assessment**

- 7.1 Local authorities have a responsibility to meet the Public Sector Duty of the Equality Act 2010. The Act gives people the right not to be treated less favourably due to protected characteristics. It is important to consider the potential impact on such groups and individuals when designing or delivering services.

8. **Financial and Resource Implications**

- 8.1 The software costs for providing the solution to enhance the One Front Door approach and support the One Council Project will be as below.
- 8.2 A One off Capital cost of £8,000 for initial setting up and technical / consultative support from Northgate to integrate the new software with our existing applications (itemised as Works).
- 8.3 There will be an annual revenue cost of £24,190 fixed for 5 years totalling £120,950 for the 5 year period.
- 8.4 Currently there is no revenue budget allocated to this, and there will therefore be an additional £24,190 revenue pressure both in-year for 2021/22 and from 2022/23 onwards. This pressure

is in addition to the £64,216 annual pressure that has been identified in order to move the Northgate system to the Cloud.

8.5 The additional cost would need to be included within the mid-year capital programme review, however it does fall in line with the whole One Front Door ethos, by providing 24/7 access to the councils customers

Costs	2021/22 £	2022/23 £	2023/24 £	2025/26 £	2026/27 £	Total £
Works (capital)	8,000	-	-	-	-	8,000
Fees (revenue)	24,190	24,190	24,190	24,190	24,190	120,950
Total	32,190	24,190	24,190	24,190	24,190	128,950

8.6 These prices have been sourced via the CCS Data and Application Solutions (DAS) RM3821 framework which allows the Council the opportunity to make a direct award of contract without a call for competition, the framework having been previously competitively tendered.

8.7 The current package of CA-R currently has over 4,000 users enrolled. With the addition of CA-B and CA-FCR, and the impact of the One Front Door programme is expected to grow this user base to circa 10,000 users.

8.8 Currently on average it is estimated that transactions relating to council tax, business rates, benefit claims and full case reviews will be expected to save approximately £14.18 per average claim. For every 1,000 transactions that are undertaken where the end user provides the information digitally, this is estimated to save £14,180.

9. Major Risks

9.1 If we do not adopt these new modules, we will fail to provide the public with a more streamlined and more accessible access to the Council's Revenues and Benefits forms / applications.

9.2 Time delays in customer applications being processed due to none efficient back office systems and potential to be waiting on staffing resources, again delaying processing times.

10. UN Sustainable Development Goals and Climate Change Implications



11. Key Decision Information

11.1 This is not a key decision.

12. Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions

12.1 Presented to Capital, Assets and Commercial Investment Review Group on 2nd August and again on 20th September 2021.

13. **List of Appendices**

13.1 N/A

14. **Background Papers**

14.1 N/A