Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

Tuesday, 24 September 2019 7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Narinder Singh Thandi (Chair)
Cllr Brian Francis (Vice-Chair)

Councillors:  Gurjit Kaur Bains
Dakota Dibben
Gary Harding
Leslie Hills
Leslie Pearton
Tony Rana
Peter Scollard
Gurbax Singh

Mike Bytheway  Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits)
Pat Knight  Revenues and Benefits Manager
James Larkin  Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud
Chris Wakeford  Committee Services Officer (Scrutiny)

53.  Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Harold Craske and Cllr Sarah Gow; Cllr Leslie Pearton and Cllr Tony Rana attended as their respective substitutes.

54.  Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 July 2019 were signed by the Chair.

55.  Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

56.  Annual review of the Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service

The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) began by explaining that this would be his last meeting at the Council and introduced the new Revenues and Benefits Manager, Pat Knight to the Committee.

The Committee thanked the Service Manager Revenues & Benefits for all his good work during his time at the Council and welcomed the new Revenues and Benefits Manager.
The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service (Chief Audit Executive) provided Members of the Performance & Administration Committee with a copy of the annual review that has been conducted in respect of the Audit & Counter Fraud shared service with Medway Council.

The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service (Chief Audit Executive) highlighted the following:

- There have been significant sickness levels in this department over the last 2 years and as a result the counter fraud activity has not noticeably increased.
- Reduction in timescales for audit reviews wasn’t achieved because there has been a focus on the quality of work and ensuring accuracy, rather than quantity.
- The Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service continues to deliver savings across both authorities.
- The feedback from officers involved in the shared service is, on the whole, positive.
- The key areas of focus for the coming year for both authorities have been identified as follows:
  - Ensure delivery of the audit & Counter Fraud work plans for 2019-20.
  - Create a period of stability within the service.
  - Look for training opportunities to achieve ambition for multi-disciplinary officers.

The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service (Chief Audit Executive) fielded questions from the Committee and highlighted the following:

- The feedback was collected by emailing all officers a questionnaire, then collating and discussing the results with the team.
- The Council no longer investigates Housing Benefit Fraud; the Department for Work and Pensions deals with this area.
- Outturn for last year:
  - Identified historic liability of £9,899 in terms of Council Tax
  - Additional £3,891 bill for future years.
  - 5 Council properties were recovered from people who weren’t using them as they were supposed to.
  - Prevented a fraudulent right to buy and prevented a loss of £80,900
- Performance this year to date has vastly improved:
  - Identified historic liability of £106,609 in terms of Council Tax
  - Bill for future years: additional £51,586
  - 4 Council properties recovered since April.
  - Prevented another fraudulent right to buy which has prevented a loss of £82,800

The Committee congratulated the Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service (Chief Audit Executive) and his team for a good performance.

The Committee noted the report.

57. Audit & Counter Fraud Satisfaction Survey 2018-19

The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service (Chief Audit Executive) informed Members of the results of a survey aimed at identifying the level of satisfaction
with the services provided by the Audit & Counter Fraud Team.

The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service (Chief Audit Executive) highlighted the following:

- The results of the survey indicate that clients are largely satisfied with the services received from Audit & Counter Fraud, with eight of the 11 respondents saying they were very satisfied or satisfied with the overall service; the remaining three gave a neutral response.
- The key positives drawn from the survey are that the majority of respondents are happy with the current balance of the type of audit reviews undertaken and also with the balance of the depth of the scope based on the number of days available for each review. The majority also indicated that they are happy with the current format of reports and volume of information they contain. In addition, almost all respondents stated that they understand the role of the service and know how the team can be contacted.
- Areas for improvement have also been identified, the main one relating to communication with the wider organisation to provide a better understanding of the role of the service and how it supports the council in reaching its objectives and also in relation to the preparation of the annual Audit & Counter Fraud Plan. Accuracy of reports and the value of recommendations were also identified as areas that clients felt could be improved and while steps have already been taken to address this, further improvements will be sought.
- The Satisfaction Survey will be sent out again next year but will not be anonymous this time so further discussions / clarification of answers can take place in order to get the full picture to enable the improvement of the service.

The Committee noted the results of the Audit & Counter Fraud satisfaction survey 2018-19.

58. Revenues & Benefits Update

The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) provided the following update to the Committee:

Performance and Workload of the Benefits Service

The average number of days to assess new benefit claims is now 14.8 and therefore under the target of 20 days.

HB claims are processed in 13.1 days and CTR claims in 15.6 days

The average number of days to assess changes in circumstances is 4.4 days and therefore under the target of 5 days.

HB changes in circumstances are processed in 5.1 days and CTR changes in circumstances in 3.9 days

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

The DHP Fund for 2019/20 is £221,412 and as at 31 August 2019 £95,396 had been allocated to support residents within the borough.
233 applications have been received with 114 being successful.

16 cases have involved helping customers with the spare room subsidy restriction and 23 with the Local Housing Allowance restrictions.

**Universal Credit (UC)**

In May 2018, the Universal Credit (UC) full service was rolled out across the Borough. It is now in operation throughout the whole of England and as a result the Housing Benefit total caseload (i.e. the total number of claimants within the Borough) has reduced from 6,551 at 1 April 2018 to 5,016 at 1 September 2019; a reduction of 23.4%.

437 Housing Benefit cases were cancelled in 2018/19 as those claimants either moved onto Universal Credit or experienced a change in circumstances that means that they are no longer eligible to claim Housing Benefit.

153 Housing Benefit cases have been cancelled in 2019/20

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) can be awarded to top up and assist residents receiving UC providing the award includes an element for housing costs. In 2019/20 79 UC cases have received a DHP.

**Council Tax Reduction Scheme**

The Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS), which replaced council tax benefit from 1 April 2013, has been uprated and aligned with national benefit rates each year in accordance with prescribed requirements from Government and in line with benefit rates and allowances provided in the annual uprating circular published by the DWP.

The Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) 2019/20 will be based on the 2018/19 scheme with amendments for prescribed requirements and uprating this is available to view on our website at:


In addition to the above amendments, to simplify claiming and administration of CTRS, the scheme has been amended to allow a claim for UC to be treated as the intention to claim council tax reduction from the date of the UC claim. That information can be obtained via the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Data Hub. A claim made in this way would of course be subject to all other rules around entitlement as a claim made directly to the Council.

The CTRS caseload has reduced from 7,317 at 1 April 2018 to 6,857 as at 1 September 2019.
Collection of council tax and business rates

As at the end of August the collection rate for Council Tax is 47.51% the target is 97%. This compares to a collection rate of 47.50% at the same point in the year twelve months ago which resulted in a year end collection rate of 96.87%

As at the end of August the collection rate for Business Rates is 47.37% the target is 99%. This compares to a collection rate of 47.06% at the same point in the year twelve months ago which resulted in a year end collection rate of 99.11%

Citizens Access Council Tax

Citizens Access Council Tax is live as a view only solution that will allow customers to view the council tax account balance, instalments due and payments made, view council tax bills for current and previous years and view any discounts or exemptions including Council Tax Reduction.

It has been launched without too much publicity to allow us time to test and ensure the product works as expected in a ‘live’ environment.

However there is still the remaining functionality of Citizens Access Council Tax to implement as well as Citizens Access Business Rates and Citizens Access Benefits.

In time, it is fully anticipated that the digital solution will generate savings in paper and postage as well as resourcing efficiencies within the team.

The Service Manager, Revenues & Benefits fielded questions from the Committee and highlighted the following:

- Since the introduction of Universal Credit; the Council doesn’t get as many housing benefit claimants which makes administration easier but overall the system is not easier for the claimants with waiting times for housing support reported to be up to 5 weeks.
- The Council has seen a rise in Discretionary Housing Payments claimants since the introduction of Universal Credit.
- The Discretionary Housing Payment fund is given to the Council by the Department for Work and Pensions and has reduced been reduced by £50,000 since last year.
- The criteria for Discretionary Housing Payment is based on income and further details on why the individual is suffering hardship. The Council looks at each claim on its own merits and follows good guidance.
- The Service Manager, Revenues & Benefits agreed that the Council needs ensure that its services are fully accessible to all people.
- The Citizens Access Council Tax is a good online solution that embraces the digital age. Paper options will always be available for those that need them but the Council will be encouraging as many people as possible to go for the digital solution. Further functions will be added to the system in the near future and there is also the potential for an App.
The Committee noted the Revenues & Benefits Update.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.11 pm