

Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

Thursday, 4 July 2019

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Harold Craske
Dakota Dibben
Sarah Gow
Gary Harding
Leslie Hills
Peter Scollard
Gurbax Singh

Mike Bytheway	Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits)
James Larkin	Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud
Jackie Baker	Assistant Manager (Revenue & Benefits)
Michelle Batstone	Corporate Change Manager
Ben Turner	Corporate Performance Manager
Chris Wakeford	Committee Services Officer (minutes)

49. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Gurjit Kaur Bains.

50. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 March 2019 were signed by the Chair.

51. Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made.

52. Overview of Performance & Administration Portfolio

The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) highlighted the terms of reference for Cabinet Committees, included in Annex 1.7 of the Council's Constitution:

"To make recommendations to the relevant portfolio holder as to determining any matters within his/her remit. The Committees may invite such other persons as appear appropriate to attend and take part in their deliberations, subject to the nondisclosure of confidential and exempt information (as defined in the Access to Information Rules set out in Annex 2.2 to this Constitution)".

The following service areas have been designated as within the scope of the Performance & Administration Committee:

- Revenue & Benefits
- Corporate Performance
- Internal Audit & Counter Fraud
- Corporate Change
- Information Governance

The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud, Corporate Change Manager and Corporate Performance Manager provided the Committee with an overview of the service areas included within the Performance & Administration Portfolio, as detailed above and in Appendix 2 of the report.

The Committee considered each area in turn and officers provided responses to Members questions, as detailed below:

Revenue & Benefits

The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) highlighted the following:

- There is a legal process to the recovery of council tax whereby customers are sent a reminder letter followed by a second reminder in some cases and/or a final reminder letter before a summons letter is issued. Prior to the summons hearing at the Magistrates Court a summons surgery is held so that customers have an opportunity to speak to us face to face. Summons surgeries are quite well attended (into double figures). The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) mentioned that it is difficult to provide a more personal service due to the fact that there are over 40,000 council tax accounts. The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) agreed to circulate the summons letter to the Committee.
- The Council's housing benefit caseload is dropping (15% reduction in claimants) because people now have to claim Universal Credit instead of coming directly to the Council.
- The Council works with as many support agencies as it can including; Citizens Advice Bureau, Jobcentre Plus etc.
- Long Term Empty Homes Premium; GBC has 76 homes at 100% premium. The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) agreed to provide a monetary figure or this.
- There is not a waiting list for Discretionary Housing Payments; each application is assessed on its own merits however not all can be granted due to there being limited funding.
- The Discretionary Rate Relief (DRR) scheme does still apply. With the introduction of the Business Rates Retention Scheme from the 1 April 2013 the awarding of DRR has a direct financial effect upon the Authority (having previously been funded largely by Central Government only).

Corporate Performance

- The Corporate Performance Manager explained the team's scope of duties and that the current focus is the development of the council's new Corporate Plan in line with community needs, community expectations, as established by a recent consultation, and the pledges made in the administration's election manifesto. It was also confirmed that performance reporting, to chart the progress of work against the Corporate Plan's policy objectives, will continue to Cabinet Committees on a quarterly basis.

The Committee commended the good work that had gone into creating a clear performance management framework.

Internal Audit & Counter Fraud

The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud highlighted the following:

- 95% completion of 2018-19 audit plan (on target)
- 65% of productive resource used on audit assurance & consultancy and 35% on counter fraud in line with targets
- Fraud savings in 2018-19 total: £166,760 which can be broken down as follows:
 - £13,860 cashable
 - Notional savings: £72,000
 - Blocked fraudulent right to buy application: £80,900 (prevented loss)
- Gravesham share of service costs 2018/19: £193,242

The Committee commended the good work of the Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Team.

Corporate Change

The Corporate Change Manager provided an overview of the activities that the Corporate Change Team are involved in, highlighting the corporate support nature of the work. Specifically, Members drew out the following points:

- Engagement with staff is critical and Members were keen to understand how this is addressed. The Corporate Change Manager advised that, in the past, there has been a tool for employees to put forward their ideas and consideration is currently being given to resurrecting this procedure.
- Members were keen to understand the mental health support provided by the council, given that change can be very stressful for people. The Corporate Change Manager advised that the Human Resources team do a lot of work in respect of mental health awareness with staff and the Council has designated trained officers to help staff. In addition, the council has an Employee Assistance Program for staff which enable staff to access external support on specific areas should they require it. The Corporate Change Manager advised that she would ask the HR Team to provide an overview of the support provided to officers to the Committee.

Information Governance

The Corporate Change Manager, in the absence of the Information Governance Manager, provided an overview of the Information Governance arrangements that the council has in place. Specifically, Members drew out the following points:

- In 2018/19 the Council responded to 86% of the 799 FOI/EIR requests within the 20 working days but the Information Commissioner expects 90% of responses to be made on time. Members were keen to understand what action the ICO may take in respect of performance dropping below the 90% threshold. The Corporate Change Manager advised that she would liaise with the Information Governance Manager to provide a response to this question to the Committee.
- The Corporate Change Manager advised that there had not been any serious data breaches by the council in recent years. Any data breach should be reported within 72 hours and Members enquired as to the ramifications for the local authority should they not meet this requirement. The Members were advised that the council has an Information Governance Group to address any governance issues and, if necessary, an emergency meeting would be called to ensure timescales are met for any breach that has been identified. The Corporate Change Manager advised she would liaise with the Information Governance Manager to provide a response to the Committee regarding the ICO approach to non-notification of breaches.
- There has been a 20% increase in Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Regulations (FOI/EIR) requests and Members were keen to understand the trend in respect of FOI requests over recent years. Members were advised that requests cover all areas of the Council including; Housing Benefits, Business Rates, Debt etc and these are monitored on a weekly basis by officers across the council. The Corporate Change Manager agreed to speak to the Information Governance Manager and ask her to provide trend analysis data to the Committee regarding the increase in FOI/EIR requests.

Resolved that the Committee noted the report

The Assistant Manager (Revenue & Benefits) highlighted the upcoming Revenues & Benefits Member training session that is taking place on 15 July 2019.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.26 pm