

Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

Thursday, 24 September 2020

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Cllrs: Helen Ashenden
Harold Craske
Dakota Dibben
Sarah Gow
Gary Harding
Leslie Hills
Elizabeth Mulheran
Gurbax Singh

Sarah Parfitt	Director (Corporate Services)
Pat Knight	Head of Revenues & Benefits
Jackie Baker	Assistant Manager Revenues & Benefits
Chris Wakeford	Committee Services Office, Scrutiny (Minutes)

76. Apologies

No apologies for absence were received.

77. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday, 10 June 2020 were signed by the Chair.

78. Declarations of Interests

No declarations of interest were made

79. Corporate Performance Report: Q1 2020-21

The Head of Revenues and Benefits present Members of the Performance & Administration Committee with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter One 2020-21 (April to June 2020).

The Chair clarified that there had been some format issues with Appendix Two to the report but these had now been resolved.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits highlighted the following:

- *PI 23 Average processing time taken for Housing Benefit claims (days)*
 - 15.9 days (Last year: 12.8 days) the increase in days is due to pressures placed on service. Last year 21,000 items of work; this year 38,000
 - August 2020: new housing benefit claims are being processed in 10.9 days which is a great improvement despite the increase in workload.
- *PI 24 Average processing time for changes of circumstance in Housing Benefit claims (days)*
 - The average number of days to assess change of circumstances in respect of existing benefit claims is now an exceptional 3.6 days and continues to show a downward (improving) trend with June 2020 in month average now 3.1 days.
 - August: 2.2 day average which is very good (last year was 4 days)
 - At the end of March, nationally; new claims were calculated in 17days (GBC are currently on 14 days)
 - Change of circumstances, nationally: 5 days (GBC are 3.4 days)
 - The Assistant Manager Revenues & Benefits and her team have done an excellent job.
- *PI 26 Total number of reported corporate complaints*
 - During Q1 there were 41 Stage 1 complaints which were dealt with by the relevant service. No complaints were escalated to Stage 2 or Stage 3 during this quarter. The complaints covered a number of services but the highest number of complaints for any one department was for Waste and Horticultural Services.
- *PI 50 Total number of people signed up to citizens access*
 - At the end of June 5429 people had signed up; this has now increased further to 6128. Customer Services are receiving fewer enquiries as a result. This service is now being extended to businesses, a small number (22) have already signed up and it hasn't been publicised yet.
- *PI 49 % of posts involved in shared service arrangements*
 - A fundamental review of the council's Planning service is underway. The results of this review have been delayed due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as officers have been working away from the office which has meant progressing change has been difficult. However, a report is in the process of being finalised which will include a service improvement plan and will be shared with the Lead Member in due course.
- *PI 55 % of internal audit recommendations implemented*
 - This will be covered in the next agenda item: Annual Review of the Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service
- *PI 56 % of information requests completed within statutory deadline*
 - Dropped down to 83% - bearing in mind the extra pressure the Council was under this is quite good.
- Discretionary Housing Payments – the fund was just over £300,000. As at 31 August 2020 GBC spent £82,000 (27%) which is a bit less than normal for this time of year,

this could be a result of the government putting a stay on eviction of tenants so there is less pressure on people to apply for DHP.

- Hardship fund - £893,000. GBC have now paid £685,000 (77%) which leaves £207,000
- There was a slight delay in applying hardship fund to working age claimants in receipt of working tax credit due to the very complicated software that had to be thoroughly tested.
- Universal Credit: our benefit caseload has reduced to 6551 (down by 34%)
- Council Tax Reduction Scheme has started to increase since 1 April from 6730 up to 6817 but dropped a little in August.
- Council Tax: at the end of August GBC is down on collection by 1.8% compared to where we were last year. Nationally: average reduction of over 2%
- Business Rates: 1.7% down on collection - National average: reduction of 8%
- Covid-19 – There has been a relaxation on the recovery process; instead of issuing formal notices, softer notices have been issued to identify people who simply cannot pay due to the pandemic. There have been 3000 cases where GBC have managed to assist people to manage their payments.
- Business Support Grants: GBC were awarded £16.1million. £14.55million has been paid to 1190 businesses
- Discretionary Business Grant Fund Scheme: £716,000 has been ring fenced for those businesses that weren't eligible for Business Support Grants.

Following questions from the Committee, Head of Revenues and Benefits clarified the following points:

- The Council will look to help tenants manage their payments and assist them wherever it is possible to do so.
- The Council intends to increase the use of online services and will work with the Communications department to promote this to our customers.
- The Revenues and Benefits team is working more efficiently through automation of change in circumstances, streamlining, assistance with resilience work and through working from home.
- The Discretionary Housing fund is targeted at working age claimants only and has been extended for those of working age who are in receipt of working tax credit.
- Enforcement agents have had to give one months notice before taking any further action and they have identified a number of vulnerable cases that they refer back to us. All Revenues and Benefits and Customer Service staff have been trained and have been very careful in handling cases during pandemic. They are very adept at identifying those who can't pay and those who won't pay.

The Chair thanked all the officers who have worked so hard during the pandemic.

Resolved that the Corporate Performance Update: Quarter One 2020-21 be noted.

80. Annual Review of the Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service

The Director (Corporate Services) provided the Committee with an apology from The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service who was unable to join the meeting due to another engagement.

The Director (Corporate Services) 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 Director (Corporate Services) provided a summary of the review recommendations:

- Officers to return to designated roles as part of a multi-disciplinary service rather than multi-disciplinary officers
- Invest in additional resource in the form of a second intelligence Analyst (fixed term contract) to deal with the increased data matching.

Following questions from the Committee, The Director (Corporate Services) clarified the following points:

- ***Deliver the statutory internal audit function***
The team did have some disruption, primarily because the Council redirected resources due to the pandemic so at the end of March planned work against the audit plan was down but did rise back up to 92%
- ***Deliver an effective counter fraud and investigation service***
£82,800 is the figure that is applied nationally to right to buy; it's a nominal amount, not the true value of a property. It is based on the market value of a property and the discount value on right to buy.
Right to buy fraud can be attempted through a non-council tenant involvement in right to buy or coercing or money laundering.
- ***Provide a Single Point of Contact (SPOC) for the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) for their investigation of Housing Benefit Fraud***
We are required to do this and an excellent service has been maintained
- ***Deliver a reduction in the cost of service delivery to mitigate the reduction in funding from the DWP as a result of the introduction of the Single Fraud Investigation service (SFIS)***
This has been delivered, the Finance Team have confirmed the service is still value for money; it is still delivering savings of about £80,000 a year were the council to have continued to deliver the service in-house.
- ***Provide increased resilience and flexibility to meet the needs of both councils***
Officers have been redeployed around council; this shows resilience and flexibility.
- ***Investigate potential apprenticeship opportunities for staff development***
Two members of staff have been identified and will be provided with the opportunity to upskill and gain a qualification. This has been delayed due to the pandemic but are due to commence in the next couple of months.

The Committee thanked the Director (Corporate Services) for the update on the Annual Review of the Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service.

Resolved that the Committee noted the Annual Review of the Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8:18pm