

Performance & Administration Cabinet Committee

Monday, 23 November 2020

7:30pm

Present:

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

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

Sarah Parfitt Director (Corporate Services)
Pat Knight Head of Revenues & Benefits
Ben Clarke Committee & Scrutiny Assistant (Minutes)

81. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Gary Harding; Cllr Derek Ashenden substituted.

82. To sign the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 24 September 2020 were signed by the Chair.

83. To declare any interest Members may have in the items contained on this agenda. When declaring an interest Members should state what their interest is.

No declarations of interest were made.

84. Q2 2020-21: Performance Report

Members of the Performance & Administration Committee were presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Two 2020-21 (July to September 2020).

Before going into the report, the Head of Revenues & Benefits gave some context to the outturns to Members and updated them on the additional pressures the service had experienced due to its involvement in delivering the Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits guided Members through the report highlighting key performance figures from within the Performance Indicators covering the period July to September 2020.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits added to the information in the report and advised Members of updated performance figures:

- The average number of days to assess housing benefit claims improved further and as at end of October 2020 the figure stood at 13.5 days
- The average number of days to assess change of circumstances in respect of existing benefit claims continued to show a downward trend and as at end of October 2020 the figure stood at 2.9 days; the team were performing above average despite an increased workload stemming from the pandemic. The additional automation and the implementation of vastly improved processes to the service assisted the team with the heavier workloads
- In addition, the team received 43769 items of work during the first half of the year compared to 17544 during the same period the previous year
- Council Tax collection rate had improved and stood at 1.2% below the rate for the equivalent time last year, at the previous Committee meeting it was reported that the figure was 1.8% showing that the team were slowly closing the gap
- The Business Rates collection rate remained at 1.7% below the rate at the equivalent time last year, as reported during the last quarter and against the national average of collection being 8% down. During the first and second lockdown, the process of sending formal notices for recovery of Council Tax and Business Rates was suspended but officers continued to call customers. Those calls would consist of reminding the customers to pay what they owed or signposting them to services if they were having issues making payments due to difficulties in their life that stemmed from the pandemic such as job loss etc. So far, 4800 cases had been assisted with deferred payments or extensions on their instalment plans

It was noted by the Committee that Gravesham's performance figures were better than other local authorities within Kent as well as above nationwide averages.

The Head of Revenue & Benefits informed the Committee of a number of grants, and their associated figures, which had been distributed to residents in the Borough:

- Business Support Grant
- Hardship Fund
- Test and Trace Isolation Payments
- Local Restrictions Support Grant (Closed)

Due to an issue with the Head of Revenue & Benefits audio, a portion of his presentation was not heard and it was agreed that the Head of Revenues & Benefits would circulate a document containing the information that had been missed.

The Director (Corporate Services) continued with the report and gave Members a brief overview of the Performance Indicators in the following policy commitments (pages 17-20):

1. Deliver a more resilient, creative and cost-effective council: implement a programme of 'continuous change', overhauling business processes and delivering new, innovative service design.

2. Drive service improvement and corporate governance: a robust and benchmarked performance management framework, delivered by services underpinned with sound internal controls.
3. Successfully manage key business risks: embed a culture of compliance with all policy, constitutional and legislative demands.

Following a request for clarification from a Member due to the audio cut-out; the Head of Revenues and Benefits explained that the Government had deferred evictions until the end of March 2021 which meant that the Council had not received that many applications for discretionary housing payments compared to previous years. Evictions could still be enforced but it would only be able to occur in very limited circumstances.

The Director (Corporate Services) and the Head of Revenue & Benefits fielded questions from the Committee and explained that:

- This Committee was not the correct environment to be discussing individual complaints received but the report identified that the Council had received less complaints than compared to Q2 2019/20 and the important things for Members to watch was the escalation of those complaints. The Council may have received complaints which made it to stage 1 but very few were escalated to stages 2 or 3 which showed that the complaint was dealt with in the first instance. It is a customer's right to make a complaint if they feel they have received poor service and generally, it was the frontline services that received the most complaints such as Planning, Waste Management and Housing but the complaints varied depending on what was happening at the time
- The Service Review Process identified that the Planning Service required a review of their processes in order to enhance them and make them more efficient ; the report which had been written for the review had been concluded and the recommendations within the report were due to be considered by Management Team. The Director (Corporate Services) assured the Committee that an update on that review would be submitted in the next quarterly performance report but ultimately it was for the Planning Service to decide what, in terms of specific operational improvements, they would implement

In response to a Members concern that the wording in Policy Commitment '4. Successfully manage key business risks' was too technical for the public and Councillors without expert knowledge to understand, the Director (Corporate Services) agreed to amend it for the Q3 report.

The Committee congratulated the team for their hard work during the course of the pandemic and gave their thanks to officers for running an essential service during a difficult time and still managing to maintain high performance figures.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 20:06pm.