

Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

Wednesday, 10 February 2021

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Narinderjit Singh Thandi (Chair)

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

Sarah Parfitt Director (Corporate Services)
Pat Knight Head of Revenues & Benefits
James Larkin Audit and Counter Fraud Shared Services Manager
David Herrington Digital Manager
Lauren Wallis Committee Services Officer (minutes)

87. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Brian Francis. Cllr Christina Rolles attended as his substitute.

88. To sign the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 23 November 2020 were signed by the Chair.

89. 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.

90. Annual Review of the Revenues & Benefits Shared Management Arrangement

The Director (Corporate Services) introduced the report which was for information only. Since October 2019, the Council has had in place a shared service arrangement with Medway Council for the provision of management services for the Revenues & Benefits Service. This involved the Head of Revenues & Benefits and the Revenues Manager employed by Medway Council taking managerial responsibility for service provided by Gravesham Borough Council and Medway Council.

As per the Council's Working in Partnership Framework (which was adopted by Council on 16 April 2019), a formal review of the shared management arrangement had to be undertaken on an annual basis. This year's Review had been very positive and recommended the continuation of the shared arrangement. The Head of Revenues & Benefits and the Revenues Manager had proved very beneficial to Gravesham especially during the pandemic which had proven the benefits of the Council being able to access skill sets available across the two authorities. Members were advised that the service would continue to focus on the deployment of skills and looking at how this could be improved.

The following points were raised during discussion on the report:

- Following a question on the monthly dashboard reports to the shadow Portfolio Holder, the Director (Corporate Services) confirmed that she would ensure these would take place.
- In relation to the procurement of the IT and software for Revenues & Benefits, Members were informed that both authorities had separately procured the Northgate system before the shared arrangement had come into being. No IT or software had been procured since that time. Both councils had two Northgate systems, the first for the calculation of revenues and benefits and the second being a document imaging system and each authority had a different version of the system. This would need to be bought into alignment which would reduce the staff training required and increase resilience.
- The words "external resilience" referred to a service resource provided by Northgate which local authorities could buy in. It was noted that the Council had taken advantage of this service due to the Test and Trace work required to be administered by the team.
- The importance of Test and Trace payments for residents who had to self-isolate was highlighted and Members were advised that these payments had been prioritised as required by Central Government. The Committee was advised that the team had been able to process the applications for payment using the criteria laid down by the Government using existing resources and the Northgate resilience service. The Head of Revenues & Benefits confirmed that the Council had received 903 applications so far and, once the correct details had been received from the claimant, payment could be processed within 2 to 3 days. It was also noted that an average of 27 claims a week had been received in November, 59 in December and 160 in January. The highest number received per week had been 152 and the team had managed to keep up with processing the claims. A report on this subject would be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee.
- It was confirmed that the costing for the second period represented a full year and the relative increases were inflationary and included a cost of living increase.

Resolved that the report be noted.

91. Corporate Performance Report: Quarter 3 2020/21

Members were presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for quarter 3 2020/21 (October to December 2020)

The Head of Revenues & Benefits noted that information on performance over the period was presented in tabular and graphical form for all indicators. Where any data was not

presented, this related either to those indicators reported on an annual basis or, alternatively, where data had not yet been submitted in time for the presentation of the report due to the very short run in time to publication of the reports after the quarter-end.

The following key points with regard the figures were highlighted as follows:

- PI 23 – The officer was pleased to report that performance had improved. There was an error in the narrative in that 12.2 days should read 12.8 days, however, the graphical information was correct. Members noted that the national average was 17 days and the Kent average was 16 days.
- PI 24 – Performance remained strong although it was less than quarter 2 as the service had been impacted by the introduction of Test & Trace. Automation had been introduced which kept the number of days down. Members noted that both the national average and the Kent average was 6 days and the Council's performance had improved on quarter 3 last year.
- PI 28 – This remained the same as quarter 2. 49 complaints of the 52 in the quarter had been resolved at Stage 1 and the remainder had gone on to Stages 2 and 3. It was noted that the number of complaints being received had been reducing in the 3 months of quarter 3.
- PI 50 – at the end of the quarter there were 7,211 users of Citizens' Access, which was significant increase since the end of quarter 4 2019/20. It was acknowledged that there was a long way to go but activity had increased with barely any promotion.
- PI 49 – This was an annual indicator and it was noted that the review of the Planning & Development service was currently being considered by the Chief Executive.
- PI 55 – The Audit and Counter Fraud Shared Services Manager advised that this indicator was related to the percentage of audit recommendations and 18 of the 48 remained outstanding. Ten of the 18 had a completion deadline of 31 December 2020 and there had been a very tight turnaround to meet reporting deadlines, further impacted by the Christmas break and staff leave. In addition, planned delivery was based on the 9 months to 31 March 2021 and today's figure was 63% so matters were broadly on track and the first quarter of 2020/21 had been lost to the pandemic. Some investigation activity had been undertaken this year but the financial value had been lower than in previous years because of the lockdown and the inability to undertake face to face interviews.
- PI 56 – the officer was able to provide a verbal update to the committee, reporting that performance in Q3 was 84%. It was noted that this indicator was slightly down on quarter 2. However, the Council had received 165 information requests in the last quarter 3 whilst also responding to the ongoing COVID pandemic.

The following points were raised during discussion on the report:

- In relation to PI 50, it was confirmed that the main reason for the increase in people signing up for Citizens' Access was to do with Business Rates and Council Tax in particular. Clients had got used to accessing Universal Credit online and bringing benefit services online in future would be a focus of the team. However, at the present time the service remained involved in the effects of the pandemic and were focussing on promoting the grants available and not so much the day to day work. In the next quarter it was intended to look at benefits and the service had just gone live with online direct debits and the response had been very promising. In addition, online billing had also had a good response which meant less printing costs and paper use. The Head of Revenues & Benefits was working closely with the

Communications Team and a good example was the promotion of hardship payments which had resulted in a significant uptake.

- In relation to accessing the website, the Committee was advised that access was constantly being reviewed making it more simple to use and using plain English.
- Following a question on communicating with those people with disabilities or were vulnerable, the officer noted that the Council's website met with accessibility rules, however it was felt that improvements could still be made. The Head of Revenues & Benefits hoped to be able to arrange to meet appropriate groups to enhance his knowledge on these matters.
- A question was raised in relation to Housing Benefits being 1 of the 6 benefits being incorporated in Universal Credit and it was explained a new applicant would apply to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for Universal Credit and the claim would include housing costs. If there was a significant change, the claimant would move off of housing benefit and be transferred to Universal Credit. The Government intended to migrate the majority of housing benefits claimants over to Universal Credit but this initiative had been delayed. The pandemic had resulted in more applications for Universal Credit so the Housing Benefit workload for the Council was reducing but more slowly than anticipated. A pilot scheme in another local authority for mass migration had been abandoned. However, it was always the intention for local government to be left with the more complex housing benefit cases.
- The non-inclusion of a Council Tax indicator in the report was questioned and Members were advised that it had not been included in the past but had been reported verbally. Council Tax collection had been down by 1.83% and Business Rates had been 1.77% down. This meant the Council's performance had been positive against the 2% and 8% national averages respectively. The Director (Corporate Services) offered a verbal update on Council Tax figures at future meetings of the Committee where Corporate Performance was included on the agenda.
- In relation to PI 23 and PI 24 the Head of Revenues & Benefits confirmed the following:
 - The number of new claims processed in this financial year had been 1,499.
 - The number of changes of circumstances processed in this financial year had been 26,586.
 - The number of changes of circumstances received in this financial year had been more than 40,000 but some had been multiple changes.
- The Director (Corporate Services) confirmed that the subject of complaints varied but were usually matters of interest to the public. She offered to find out the details and include in the narrative of future reports.
- PI 55 - One of the outstanding recommendations regarding the back up of IT arrangements was highlighted. The Director (Corporate Services) agreed it was a priority in relation to home working but issues had been caused by the pandemic and the Council was in the process of updating IT systems but had experienced difficulties securing kit and getting it installed. The project was on target to be fully completed by the end of March.
- It was noted that PI 49 was an annual performance indicator and therefore showed quarter 4 and not quarter 3. As mentioned that Planning review was completed, had been submitted to the Chief Executive and there would be an update in the next few weeks.
- The policy document covering the Revenues & Benefits shared service arrangement was reviewed every 3 years and the review set out the criteria of entering such

arrangements and the rules of engagement. A report of Working in Partnership would be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair thanked officers for all their hard work achieving the high levels of performance during the pandemic and the lockdowns.

Resolved that the report be noted.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.18 pm