

Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

Wednesday, 9 June 2021

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Harold Craske
Dakota Dibben
Gary Harding
Leslie Hills
Samir Jassal
Elizabeth Mulheran
Gurbax Singh
Gurdip Ram Bungar

Darren Everden Assistant Director (IT & Transformation)
Pat Knight Head of Revenue & Benefits
James Larkin Audit & Counter Fraud and Shared Service Manager
Gayle Jones Information Governance Manager
Lauren Wallis Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

1. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Sarah Gow. Cllr Gurdip Ram Bungar attended as her substitute.

2. To sign the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 25 March 2021 were signed by the Chair.

3. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

4. Corporate Performance Report: Quarter 4 2020/21

The Head of Revenues & Benefits presented the Committee with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter 4 2020/21 (January to March 2021).

The Head of Revenues & Benefits highlighted the following:

- PI 23 - Average processing time taken for Housing Benefit claims (days) – It was confirmed that at the end of Quarter 4 the average had been 12.4 days with the last

year's indicator being 12.8 days and the national and Kent averages being 17 days which was an excellent result.

- PI 24 - Average processing time for changes of circumstance in Housing Benefit claims (days) – It was confirmed that at the end of Quarter 4 the average time taken had been 2.9 days with the previous year's average being 4 days and the national and Kent averages being 6 days. The current processing time (at the end of May 2021) for Housing Benefit claims was 14.2 days with the last year's average being 16.2 days.
- In relation to Change of Circumstances, Members noted that at the end of May 2021 the average time had been 7.3 days compared to May 2020 performance being 3.8 days. The reason for the drop was attributed to the increase in the Government's requirements around Full Claims Reviews. This equated to a further 45 claims per months having to be assessed which had had an adverse effect as had some minor resource issues. In response, officers had looked at ways to improve administrative processes, It had been discovered that the process could be made more efficient and was rectified which improved performance immediately.
- PI 26 – Total number of reported corporate complaints – At the end of Quarter 4 64 complaints had been received which was slightly up on the previous quarter. 209 complaints had been received in total over 2020/21 with 255 being received in 2019/20. In relation to this Quarter's complaints, 58 had been considered at Stage 1, four at Stage 2 and two at Stage 3 so the majority had been resolved at an early stage.
- PI 50 – Total number of people signed up to Citizens Access – At the end of Quarter 4 8,594 customers had signed up which was a 19% increase on Quarter 3 and a 92% improvement since 2019/20 which was very encouraging.
- PI 49 – Percentage of posts involved in shared service arrangements - The annual indicator had been static being 6.1% in 2019/20 and 6% in 2020/21. The Review of the Working Partnership Framework had been completed and had been considered by the Committee in March 2021 and had been adopted by Cabinet in June 2021.

The Head Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service highlighted the following:

- PI 55 – Percentage of internal audit recommendations implemented – The Committee was advised that this figure stood at 73.5% in Quarter 4 and 76.2% in Quarter 4 2019/20 so performance had been consistent. There were only 13 recommendations outstanding which was excellent given the additional pressures wrought by the pandemic. In addition, 95% of agreed assurance work had been delivered although some reports were still being finalised. Work on the 2021/22 Work Plan had commenced and a number of reviews were underway. Counter Fraud work had been affected by the pandemic and available resource had been directed to the National Fraud Initiative Exercises. A lot of this work had seen early results in 2021/22 with cashable savings already higher than last year. Visiting for investigations had already recommenced with the easing of national restrictions and face to face interviews were also going to recommence as Government restrictions were relaxed. It was hoped that this would see results return to those seen in previous years.

The Information Governance Manager highlighted the following:

- PI 56 – Percentage of information requests completed within the statutory deadline – In Quarter 4, 86% of requests had been responded to within the deadline which was an increase of 2% on the same quarter in the previous year and a consistent average

on the mid 80% was considered to be good performance. Work was being undertaken to improve policies including the training to all officers who handle Freedom of Information requests.

In relation to Council Tax and Business Rates Collection, the Head of Revenues & Benefits advised that collection of Council Tax had been measured at 94.5% was down 2% compared with the previous year, as was the national average. There had been no court time allocated to the service during 2020/21 in respect of non-payment cases. Alternative repayment plans had been made with nearly 7,000 residents including deferred/extended payments.

Business Rates collection stood at 96.5% in Quarter 4 which was down 1.8%. However, the national average was down by 8% so the Borough Council had performed well.

The officer advised that the Benefits Team measured the time it took to process claims but noted that the checks needed to be as accurate as possible. A new national indicator, the Housing Benefit Agency Award (HBAA) had placed the service for 2020/21 in the top quartile nationally. This showed that the service was not only assessing claims speedily but also accurately.

With regard to Discretionary Housing payments, these were very important to those financially affected by the pandemic and £301,000 in grants had been allocated to the Council by the Government all but £943 had been allocated (99.7%) which had been used for this purpose.

The following points were raised during discussion on this item:

- PI 26 - Total number of reported corporate complaints – Whilst it was noted that most of the complaints received had been resolved in Stage 1 of the process, it was asked if there was a logistical issue especially in relation to the increase in complaints received in relation to Waste & Horticulture. The Head of Revenues & Benefits advised that Waste & Horticulture was not his service and that the number of complaints received by Revenues & Benefits had actually seen a reduction. However, the pandemic had caused many issues and he undertook to provide an answer.
- PI 26 – Total number of reported corporate complaints – The Head Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service advised that fly tipping reports were unlikely to be included in the numbers for Waste & Horticulture complaints as they were a separate issue and also confirmed that he did not know the details of individual complaints.
- PI 55 – Percentage of internal audit recommendations implemented – Members were advised that it was not the responsibility of the Head of Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service to implement recommendations but simply to pursue implementation information from the responsible services.
- A question was raised regarding outstanding audit recommendations, specifically one regarding the new IT backup system. The Assistant Director (IT & Transformation) advised that this was a result of IT equipment supply chain issues and problems with external parties being able to visit the Civic Centre during the lockdowns in 2020. As a result there was a delay on the installation of the new systems and equipment. However, the new equipment has now been installed.
- Following a question on Discretionary Housing Payments, Members were advised that had been 35 applications as at 31 May 2021, 25 had been successful of which 3 cases had involved helping customers with the spare room

subsidy restrictions ad 14 with the Local Housing Allowance restrictions. These were national restrictions i.e. not specifically imposed by the Council. The discretionary housing payment had been awarded in those particular cases to alleviate the financial 'penalty'/restriction.

- The Council Tax collection rates were a very good reflection of the support from the Local Authority and the Government.
- The Head of Revenues & Benefits advised that the Government in response to the pandemic, had introduced 14 different business grant schemes. However, a number of businesses had not been eligible under any of these schemes and had a rate liability. The variation of collection rates between local authorities was dependent upon the mix and size of businesses in the Borough.
- Concern was expressed at the perceived increase in the number of people with disabilities due to the pandemic and that none of these vulnerable people should be missed. Head of Revenues & Benefits agreed and drew Members' attention to the last item on the agenda. He also undertook to look at various schemes in Benefits and Council Tax reduction and to consult with relevant stakeholders and groups.

Officers were congratulated on the continuous improvement in the face of trying circumstances and the Chair thanked all for their hard work and Audit staff who supported other services during the pandemic.

Resolved that the report be noted.

5. Information Governance Annual Report 2020/21

The Information Governance Manager noted that it was the first time this report had been submitted to the Committee and she requested Members' views.

The following points were raised during discussion on this item:

- It was noted that a high number of cyber-security attacks had taken place nationally for example, at schools, the NHS in Ireland, and concern was expressed that local authorities could soon come under attack. The Assistant Director (IT & Transformation) confirmed that this was an issue that was not going away any time soon and he advised that he kept in regular contact with the National Cyber Security Centre. He confirmed that, as yet, there no intelligence on targeted attacks on local authorities but noted that anyone could be collateral damage.
- Following a request with regard to the Anonymisation and Pseudonymisation Policy, the Information Governance Manager advised that the policy gave guidance to officers in relation to the processing of data i.e. the improvement of services. Anonymisation was the information with all the personal data removed and pseudonymisation was with all the personal data replaced by IT Service, by keys which allowed the data to be traced back to the source.
- It was noted that the weakest link in relation to cyber security were individuals and officers were thanked for the Member training. The upscaling of the Communications Policy was also mentioned as well as ensuring that officers were using the policies. The Assistant Director (IT & Transformation) confirmed that training was now provided annually and the training of the full suite of policies was provided to new members of staff. There was also an updated module refresher for Members and officers including specific phishing awareness training.

- The Information Governance Manager referenced the diagram on page 20 of the report and noted that it was linked to the Information Governance Framework, which was available on the Council's intranet, and advised that the information Asset owners were Assistant Directors and their Service Managers who were responsible for processing external suppliers.
- Following a question on remote working, Members were advised that IT Services ensured that all devices and systems were appropriately encrypted and the relevant policies were available on the intranet. Officers were regularly reminded to read the policies to keep themselves up to date and compliance with this requirement was checked. Page 23 of the report was referenced in relation to compliance with data incidences also being monitored and this information was used to improve processes and develop training,
- The Assistant Director IT & Transformation noted that the Council had always had the systems in place to allow for home working. However, the sheer increase in volume at very short notice had caused issues. Staff were being provided with the support and the knowledge to remain cyber secure.

Resolved that the report be noted.

6. Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) Service

The Head of Revenues & Benefits presented a report on the Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) Project which had come about through joint working with Kent County Council, Kent district councils, Citizens Advice, the Kent Community Foundation and the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP). Six local authorities, including the Borough Council, had been selected to take part in a trial that would last for one year. The product used datasets to enable better decisions to be made. For example, on whether residents were in or would be in, financial crisis for one reason or another. The first project meeting had taken place and the three objectives were set out in paragraph 2.4 of the report.

Objective 1 – The officer noted that whilst it has been difficult to tie up the data into one system, this project would help the Council to make better informed strategic decisions not only for Revenues & Benefits but other services too.

Objective 2 – This would mean identifying households either in 'financial crisis' or potentially moving into potential crises and then engaging with individuals to see what they needed to avert the crises. For example, 133 residents had been identified who may be eligible for pension credit but had not taken it up for one reason or another. It was noted that this might have made a huge difference to their financial wellbeing during a crisis such as the pandemic. It would also enable individuals to access other benefits such as free TV licenses etc.

Objective 3 – In relation to the second bullet point, it was noted that only a finite amount of assistance was financially possible and the aim was to be more informed to be able to assist and support people appropriately sooner rather than later when they might need more assistance.

The following points were raised during discussion on this report:

- A question was asked on achieving the first objective without encroaching on an individual's personal affairs. The Head of Revenues & Benefits advised that much of

the data was already held by the Council in relation to claims for benefits and this would enable a picture to be created where data would be extracted which would contain an identifier that only the Council could unlock. The algorithm to achieve this was very complex and it was intended that at the next meeting of the Committee a demonstration of the Policy In Practice dashboards would be made.

- In addition, communication campaigns would be used using both social media and non-digital means, to encourage people who the Council could assist to come forward. If the Council was the first point of contact to vulnerable individuals, then their liability could be reduced.
- Following a question of people falling through the gaps, the officer confirmed that unfortunately, some people always would and this project was about trying to close those gaps. Once the information held by the Council was collated, areas the Council may wish to target may emerge. To this end mailshots and even door knocking could be used.
- The project was considered to be a potential game changer. However, a question was raised on whether the algorithm could stop unscrupulous people from using the data for their own advantage. Members were assured that as with existing benefit claims supporting evidence would be required in support of any claims. The system would also identify concerns and the officer would continue working with the DWP and audit to identify fraud and reduce risk.
- In relation to a lack of understanding by residents of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, the officer agreed that a lot more could always be done and he was working to simplify the scheme for residents and officers to make it more transparent.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits was thanked for an enlightening report on the very interesting early stages of the projects.

Resolved that the report be noted.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.30 pm