

## Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

Thursday, 23 September 2021

7.30 pm

### Present:

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

Councillors:        John Caller  
                         Harold Craske  
                         Dakota Dibben  
                         Sarah Gow  
                         Gary Harding  
                         Leslie Hills  
                         Samir Jassal  
                         Gurbax Singh

Darren Everden        Assistant Director (IT & Transformation)  
Pat Knight              Head of Revenue & Benefits  
Ben Clarke              Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

### 7. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Elizabeth Mulheran. Cllr John Caller substituted.

### 8. To sign the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday, 09 June 2021 were signed by the Chair.

### 9. 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.

### 10. Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) Demonstration

The Head of Revenues & Benefits presented LIFT to Members.

Members were informed that it was a brand new software for the service which would be used corporately and strategically to help identify those vulnerable residents who were in financial crisis or were on the verge of going into financial crisis. Identification and engagement were a key objective for the service and the new dashboards available through LIFT would give officer's much more information. That information would allow officers to provide support to more residents who previously may not have been known to the service but were in need of financial assistance.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits gave the Committee a detailed demonstration of the Low Income Family Tracker system.

Following the demonstration, the Head of Revenues & Benefits fielded questions from the Committee and explained that:

- The service had limited information available to them but the service was promoting support available to residents in the Borough and officers were engaging with the community to ensure that anyone who needed support would receive everything they were entitled to. LIFT was a very useful tool for those identified as vulnerable through housing benefits but it would also assist in identifying those vulnerable people that were in receipt of Universal Credit but weren't in receipt of Council Tax Reduction which was previously not possible
- LIFT was brand new and had only been live for the last three months; it was updated monthly and over time trends would appear as more data was fed into the system. August's data had just been received so new cases should start to be seen by the team and hopefully that would continue every month once the new data was received. The aim of the system was to identify those in need so that they could be engaged with and their arrears reduced; they may also be entitled to other benefits which would be flagged up to the service and officers would be able to advise people what they should be claiming
- There were three objectives for the system:
  - Objective 1 – Use the information to strategically help various departments across the Council
  - Objective 2 – Reduce the amount of people in financial crisis
  - Objective 3 – Reduce the amount of Council tax arrears
- Backdated benefits were dependant on the benefit and the rules in place for it; for example the Council Tax Reduction Scheme could only be backdated one month
- One of the dashboards was only received this morning but its role was to look at the effects of universal credit and the effects of the removal of the additional £20 per week. Currently the dashboard suggested that 87 households would be removed from universal credit as the current amount they owed was less than the £20 per week but the service would seek to provide support to those households. The dashboard was new and it would be developed over time, as more data was fed into the system trend analysis would be possible and the service would be able to track the results of the support provided much better
- The 67 households in relative poverty was concerning and the service would also seek to support those households too
- As the team would be engaging more using the information that had been gathered, it was recognised that further resourcing would be required. The Head of Revenues & Benefits had already looked into further staff resourcing and had discussed it with the Director (Corporate Services) and the Chief Executive
- Data was gathered from the Revs & Bens system and was then sent off to Policy and Practice but none of the data they received had any personal information on there; they only received the postcodes which were used to map the data. The service would also be reviewing universal credit and it would eventually be built into the LIFT system
- The HMRC were not linked to any system within Revenues & Benefits; the team always had to request evidence to support benefits claims. The service did not hold

any financial information on universal credit anymore; all of that information resided with the DWP but the service was aware of how much universal credit residents were receiving and any changes that had been made. An issue for the team stemmed from changes in universal credit for residents as each change affected the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and residents Council Tax bills had to be adjusted accordingly

- Benefit claims for income and rent would need valid evidence submitted; the Head of Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Services team led on suspected fraudulent claims and investigated any claims that had been received by the service officers felt were concerning or fraudulent. The Revenues & Benefits Team still dealt with housing benefit claims and cases but it could take a long time to validate claims as the team had to wait on information and evidence before a claim could be validated fully
- Revenues & Benefits staff as well as the enforcement agents were trained to identify signs that a resident maybe vulnerable and in need of support from the Council. When staff sent out reminders, bills and notices often red flags would pop up which might indicate that a resident had fallen on hard times and needed assistance; enforcement agents knocked on doors and during their work they were able to see if a household was struggling and refer them to an officer
- A household that was usually a good bill payer that had fallen behind on arrears was an indicator for the team and the household would be contacted
- Hybrid working had not affected the team negatively as enforcement agents and officers were still in the office and conducting door knocking on residents doors; the Head of Revenues & Benefits recognised that to improve the engagement rate more work would have to be undertaken with third party organisations. As those organisations knew of certain cases that needed help that the Council would otherwise be unaware of
- Using the new LIFT tool and working in partnership with third party organisations and officers, LIFT would develop further and would hopefully inform the Council of more residents who may need help but won't contact the Council directly
- Access was very restricted to LIFT; only three people in the Council had access to it and everything was GDPR compliant. The data was not sold or sent out of the country
- The next step upon identification of vulnerable residents would be to send out letters however they usually did not generate a large response so follow up phone calls and house visits would be arranged. Additionally, the team had been working with the Communications Manager to advertise services available to residents in financial crisis and there had been numerous campaigns on social media regarding help available
- Gravesham Council was one of six Councils who were working on different elements of the system; representatives from those six Councils met monthly to discuss what was working well and what wasn't. By the time the pilot ends in February 2022, there would be a large stream of data that could be reviewed and measured; once the data had been reviewed a performance measure would be created and added to the Corporate Performance Reports that were submitted to the Committee
- The team were aware of claimants income through their housing benefit claims and Council Tax Reduction Scheme claims due to the evidence that was required for the claims but the team had never held information on estimates of what each households expenditure was
- The Chief Executive was supportive of the system and he wanted it to be considered corporately as it could be used elsewhere in the Council; the Head of Revenues & Benefits had been asked to give a similar demonstration to Wider Management Team. Following that meeting, it would be discussed strategically and then it would

be decided how it would be distributed to the rest of the Council including to other Members

The Chair thanked the Head of Revenue & Benefits for his detailed demonstration and answers.

## **11. Corporate Register of Partnerships - Extract for P&A Cabinet Committee**

Members were informed of the Council's involvement in partnerships that were within the remit of the Committee.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits advised that the current partnerships that most directly related to the work of the Performance & Administration Committee were:

- Audit and Counter Fraud Shared Service
- Revenues & Benefits Shared Management Arrangement

Members noted the information contained within the report.

## **12. Corporate Performance Report: Q1 2021-22**

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 One 2021-22 (April to June 2021).

The Head of Revenues & Benefits guided Members through appendix two and gave a statistical overview of each Performance Indicator.

Members noted the following information:

- Gravesham Council were in the top quartile in the Country for accuracy in relation to processing Housing Benefit claims
- Collection of Council Tax as at end of August 2021 was up 1.8% from this time last year
- Business Rates Collection had a decrease of 5.5% from last year but that was largely down to the rules around retail discounts changing. From 01 July 2021, instead of receiving a 100% discount, businesses were only entitled to a 66% discount which meant it increased the amount of money that Gravesham had to collect by £4.5 million. The Council had had only two months since the 01 July to collect that additional money which was why the figures had decreased; the remainder of the money to be collected had been spread over the financial year to assist businesses
- The total number of reported corporate complaints had increased but the corporate complaints process was being reviewed as it had been revealed that a large number of the complaints should have actually been classed as 'service user requests'. Only four of those forty one complaints went to stage two and of those four only three escalated to stage three. Most of the valid complaints in Housing were due to changes to the Housing Register from 01 April 2021

The Head of Revenues & Benefits gave Members updated figures for the Performance Indicators as at end of August 2021:

- PI23 - Average processing time taken for Housing Benefit – **14.2 days**
- PI24 - Average processing time for changes of circumstance in Housing Benefit claims (days) – **5.9 days**
- PI 50 - Total number of people signed up to citizens access – Increased by **2413** people
- PI55 - % of internal audit recommendations implemented – 16 were due for implementation by the end of June 2021, 7 of which have been implemented with only 9 recommendations outstanding. The team had issue reminders for responses by the end of September to the lead officers and were still waiting for those responses. As of today, the planned delivery stood at **21%** with a further **13%** underway
- PI56 - % of information requests completed within statutory deadline – The service had seen a **42%** increase in FOI requests; performance had not been affected

The Head of Revenues & Benefits and the Assistant Director (IT & Transformation) fielded questions from the Committee and explained that:

- An FOI request could be rejected if it would take over eighteen hours' worth of work to complete however they were rare and the majority were reasonably simple to provide a response too. The service also published questions and responses online so that if a similar FOI was requested then they could be directed to the Councils website
- The Head of Revenues & Benefits had not rejected any FOI requests in the last year and the Assistant Director (IT & Transformation) had only rejected one in the last two years
- If the Council held the information that the FOI requested then the Council had an obligation to release that information unless it took longer eighteen hour to collate. There was also a separate provision that stipulated that the Council did not have to recreate data that was already held in order to satisfy the request
- A wide range of people made FOI requests but more often than not they were received from businesses asking for information which could be used to create work opportunities. The press also made a large number of requests for information that could be reported on such as the amount paid out by Covid grants
- The Q1 Corporate Performance reports were considered at MT and discussed in depth prior to submission to Committee; the responsible Directors in areas where there had been complaints were asked to find out more information and resolve the issues. MT was where it was noticed that Housing Allocation drew many complaints and many of the other complaints weren't actually complaints but service user requests. The Director (Housing) would have been tasked with resolving the issues stemming from the complaints

Members noted that clarification of Housing issues and how they could be improved upon could be raised at the Housing Services Cabinet Committee.

Members noted the information contained within the report.

### **13. Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service Review**

The Committee were provided with a copy of the annual review that had been conducted in respect of the Audit & Counter Fraud shared service with Medway Council.

The Assistant Director (IT & Transformation) outlined key points from the report:

- Notice was received last week from a Counter Fraud Officer which the service was looking to replace
- All officers trialled in designated roles had been moved into permanent roles with effect from 01 April 2021
- The second Audit & Counter Fraud Intelligence Analyst post had been filled without the need for extra funding
- Progress against the Shared Services objectives could be seen at page 38 of the report
- The four recommendations for the coming year had been refreshed and were listed in the report, in full, on page 40

In response to a question about officers returning to their roles, the Director (IT & Transformation) advised that in the past officers had roving roles amongst the services and operated in different areas in different capacities. The officers had now returned to their permanent roles where they would provide specialist support to the team they were in.

In response to a request from Cllr Hills about having more simplified language in the report, the Assistant Director (IT & Transformation) agreed to feed the comment back to the Head of Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Services.

Members noted the information contained within the report.

### **Close of meeting**

The meeting ended at 20:51pm.