

Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

Wednesday, 21 September 2022

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Narinderjit Singh Thandi (Chair)

Cllr Brian Francis (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Harold Craske
Dakota Dibben
Sarah Gow
Elizabeth Mulheran
Gary Harding
Leslie Hills
Samir Jassal

Pat Knight Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits)
James Larkin Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service
Jackie Denton Customer Services Manager (Minutes)

37. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Gurbax Singh.

38. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 June 2022 were signed by the Chair.

39. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

40. Corporate Register of Partnership - July 2022

The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service presented Members of the Performance and Administration Committee with an update of the council's involvement in partnerships that are within the remit of the committee. The paper is for information only purposes.

No questions were presented.

41. Corporate Performance Update: Quarter One 2022-23

The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) and the Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service presented Members of the Performance and Administration Committee with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter One 2022-23 (April to June 2022).

Any outturns where data has been unable to be reported will be presented within the next appropriate reporting cycle.

The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) highlighted the following:

PI 23 – Average processing time taken for Housing Benefit claims (days)

In Q1 the average is 22.4 days compared to 16.4 days in Q4. Performance is not as high, our target is 20 days historically, so we are above that. In the month of August, we managed to process claims in 19.6 days so that shows we are starting to move towards expected performance.

Our performance for the previous year compared to national figures was, for all new claims, one day better than the national average and also one day better than the Kent average so that puts it into context.

As explained at the last committee, the move to Universal Credit for new claims means that councils only receive the more complex cases which are supported or temporary accommodation and pension age claimants. The mean average is affected by more complex cases. We had a meeting with the DWP performance team who advised that despite our concerns they deemed our performance as Good in comparison to other local authorities. That being said, we are looking to improve this and get it back to the average processing days that we had in the past year or so. We have recruited to all vacant posts now. We do have one member of staff shortly going on to maternity leave, but we do have support from an external agency which we have had for a number of years now. We have greatly reduced the amount of outstanding work and in the past month we had reduced it by a quarter, so we are starting to make in-roads. Benefits is a complex area, and it takes 6-12 months for a person to be fully trained, that being said, new staff are already having a positive impact on the workload and also performance but where we are clearing workloads it will affect the mean average.

PI 24 – Average processing time for changes of circumstances in Housing Benefits claims (days)

This is 11.5 days compared to the previous year outturn of 4.4 days. Our target has been 5 days so again that is much higher than we would have liked for the same reasons given for new claims. Q4 figures where national average was 3 days and Gravesham, and Kent average was also 3 days so we were on a par with the national average. One thing that has impacted greatly on my service is the requirement to make payments in a number of areas, one of those was energy payments and so to update committee:

We have paid out £5,234,550 to 34,897 households in Gravesham. We had to obtain bank details to be able to make payments in accordance with government guidance and we managed to do that for 92.5%, for the remaining 7.5% we have this week credited their council tax account with the sum of £150. We have informed them of this in writing and issued a revised council tax bill and have advised should they require a refund they will need to supply bank details which they have not supplied before.

We have also looked at making payments under the Household Support Fund and the council was awarded £257,124 to make payments to pension age households. We managed to do that using the low-income family tracker (LIFT) and we identified 749 pension age households who are currently in receipt of council tax reduction and also meet fuel poverty triggers. That means those households will have received at the end of this week £343.29 each.

We have also taken additional work on top of our priority work and had to make payments to local businesses by way of credits to accounts in respect of additional relief fund. We were awarded £1.763m and have managed to credit all of that money against different accounts where appropriate, however, £80k has been returned by businesses because they have exceeded the subsidy allowance threshold.

We are coming to the end now of a number of these payments we need to make and that will free up additional resources to concentrate on clearing the backlog that we have.

Council tax collection is 0.9% down, however, this is in the main due to two things, we have had very little court dates presented to us. We have had 3 courts to date and would normally have had 5 or 6 by now. Also, there is a trend for people to apply to pay over 12 instalments instead of the standard 10 instalments. Compared to where we were last year with where we are now, there has been an increase of 59% of households looking to pay over 12 months. 0.9% is about £600k but over time we will still collect and keep up with the collection that we have had in the past.

Business rates collection is 16.9% up. At this time last year there was a change to retail discount relief reducing from 100% relief to 66% and so we had a massive liability to collect at that time and we have since managed to do that.

PI 26 – Corporate Complaints

The number of complaints has increased from 36 in Q4 to 46 in Q1. This is off set against 97 compliments received in Q1 compared to 80 in Q4.

Revenues & Benefits received 10 complaints which tended to be about the energy payments requiring clarification and guidance and also because expectations had been raised by Central Government that payments would be made in April and there was no way we could get payments out that quickly. Complaints were also regarding the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and attempts to recover previous years' arrears of council tax bearing in mind we had restricted recovery action during the pandemic.

PI 50 – Total number of people signed up to Citizens Access

That has continued to increase with 13,695 people signed up by the end of Q1 and we are currently at 14,320. That has had a boost by people completing their application for the energy payment online and a number of people taking the opportunity to sign up to Citizens Access.

Following questions from Members of the Committee, the Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) responded as follows:

- We received additional funding to cover the cost of energy payments, payments to businesses etc. and at the end of the process there is a review that we can submit to reconcile any costs so it should be fully funded
- Regarding PI 23 Time to Process Claims, whilst cases are more complex and can take more time we want to make decisions as quickly as possible, however, there have been occasions where evidence has not been presented to us despite attempts to obtain it and what we will do is make a payment on account and if something is brought to our attention i.e. S21 Notice of eviction, we make sure that goes as a

payment on account. For Council Tax Reduction we put a hold on the account so we do not take any recovery action avoiding putting additional pressure on the resident in the meantime.

- Complex cases have always been there but they have in the past been masked by a higher proportion of simpler cases thereby reducing the mean average.
- Members agreed that all staff should be congratulated on the enormity of the task. Some of the figures are not what we might like but taking into account what we have had to do the team have done a fantastic job
- Energy poverty is calculated on 3 different things (1) household income (2) household fuel requirements for a similar household (3) fuel prices. We are using low income family tracker datasets and are trying to get other datasets to identify vulnerable households who live in a property with a poor energy rating (Energy Performance Certificate).
- A member asked the Chair, as a result of additional pressures on the team and to deal with backlog additional staff were taken on, would it be reviewed? In response the Chair advised how that will be dealt with once the service has completed the additional tasks in response to the pandemic. We still have backlog of items and so we will look at staffing levels once that is cleared.
- Direct Debits have increased, and it is now 68.6% which greatly assists us in collection. A number of people did sign up to get their energy payment quicker and it is fair to say that some cancelled it before they got their payment. Consequently, as council tax payment had not been honoured they did not receive the payment in the initial set of payments (for direct debit payers). The majority have maintained their Direct Debit and that is positive and the number of people who have signed up to have their bills electronically and electronic accounts has also increased

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

PI 49 – % of posts in shared service arrangements

This is an annual indicator. The council is intending to commence a further service review process to identify opportunities to reduce net service expenditure in the way we deliver our services and a team of officers have been appointed on a programme of continuous improvement reviews and this will be reported to Cabinet in due course.

PI 55 - % of internal audit recommendations implemented

A total of 31 recommendations/actions were due to be implemented by the end of June, 22 of which have been implemented giving an out-turn of 61.9%. Of the nine outstanding seven have now been implemented and performance at present is 77%.

We have offered an apprenticeship post to a candidate who should be taking up post in a couple of weeks.

Counter Fraud update – Cashable savings have increased to £100k since 30 June 2022. Gravesham's share of costs for the Counter Fraud Team are approx. £81k for the year so represents good value for money.

PI 56 - % of information requests completed within statutory deadline

89% of Freedom of Information requests received a response within the statutory deadline of 20 days.

Following questions from Members of the Committee, the Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service responded as follows:

- They are significant savings and the £100k is made up of historical so people receiving discounts they weren't entitled to and we also include an additional charge for the following year. We also have notable savings if we recover property due to sub-letting

The Committee noted the Corporate Performance Report: Q1 2022-23.

42. Annual Review of the internal Audit and Counter Fraud Shared Service

The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service provided Members of the Performance and Administration Committee with a copy of the annual review that has been conducted in respect of the Internal Audit & Counter Fraud shared service with Medway Council. The report is for information only.

In terms of justification to continue the partnership arrangement, the budgeted share for Gravesham is around £214k. Were we to have continued with the original in-house internal Audit and Fraud Teams that we had before the shared service, costs would be approx. £303k for the current year and so we currently save £89k.

Three actions were identified for service improvement for the coming year relating to quality control process, 90% compliance with PSIAS and increasing awareness of counter fraud services across both councils.

No questions were presented.

The Committee noted the Internal Audit and Counter Fraud Shared Service Annual Review Report.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 20:10pm.