

Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

Thursday, 21 March 2024

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Narinderjit Singh Thandi (Chair)
Cllr Gavin Larkins (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Rajinder Atwal
 David Beattie
 Leslie Hills
 Jo Hart
 Christina Rolles
 Jordan Meade
 Alan Metcalf

Pat Knight	Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services)
James Larkin	Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service
Pretti Lalli	Information Governance Manager
Karen Gingles	Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

13. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Benjamin Sizer and Cllr Dakota Dibben. Cllr Jordan Meade and Cllr Alan Metcalf attended as substitutes.

14. To sign the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on Monday 20 November 2023 were signed by the Chair.

15. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

16. Corporate Performance Report: Q3 2023-24

The Committee were presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Three 2023-24 (October to December 2023).

The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) advised the report was for information only and highlighted key points in relation to the Performance Indicators set:

- Members were referred to PI 60, where the average processing time for new housing Benefit Claims stood at 15 days in Quarter 3. It was noted that the latest available figure nationally was for Quarter 2 at 20 days, whereas Gravesham achieved 16.7

days at the end of that quarter. It was observed that there had been a decrease of the number of Housing Benefit claims, as most new claims need to be submitted to the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) as a claim for Universal Credit. Consequently, Housing Benefit claims processed were predominately made to cover those at pensionable age or living in supported accommodation or temporary accommodation.

- Member's attention was drawn to PI 61, which outlined the average processing time for change of circumstances in relation to Housing Benefit claims. At the end of Quarter 3, Gravesham's processing time was 3.5 days, however it was noted that performance was currently 3.2 days. Nationally at the end of Quarter 2, turnaround time stood at 9 days, whereas Gravesham ended Quarter 2 at 4.1 days and so were performing above average.
- In regard to PI 62 it was noted that the amount of Council Tax Reduction Claims had increased to 6661 an increase of 379 live cases since the start of the financial year. Performance to process claims currently stood at 15.9 days. Although this figure was not measured nationally the target was to complete applications under 20 days.
- PI 54 had been included, to measure the percentage of Corporate Improvement Team savings targets delivered. The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) highlighted that since this measure was initially set it had proven hard to measure due to the introduction of an additional initiative undertaken by all heads of service to identify potential budget savings and/or additional income streams. There is a question of treatment of retrospective adjustments given that general savings and corporate improvement targets (CIT) could change over time and how this can be reflected in the outcomes. CIT has unearthed process and efficiency enhancements, better customer experience and wider benefits that all could be seen as positive changes. There can also be future cost avoidance which would not necessarily show any savings in existing budgets. It was noted that in the future budget savings would be made, becoming easier to monitor and therefore more transparent.
- Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service updated Members on PI 68 in regard to the percentage of agreed internal audit actions implemented. Members were informed that there had been 42 actions agreed with 32 implemented. New actions were expected at the end of March. The internal audit programme was currently 79% complete. Members received an update in relation to fraud investigation activity during Q3. The Committee were advised that savings had been identified along with 2 council properties recovered and a fraudulent right to buy stopped.
- The Information Governance Manager updated Members on PI 69 explaining that 90.3% of information requests in Q3 were completed within the statutory deadline. This met the ICO target of 90%. Members were informed that 100% of Subject Access requests were delivered on time. There had however been a slight delay with Freedom of Information due to an email system failure causing a delay.

Members of the Committee were invited to ask questions or make comment on the report:

- Members noted that figured within the performance indicators were performing well. However, concern was raised regarding the lack of information regarding progress made with Corporate Improvement Team savings in PI 54. It was felt this was an important measure, in order to achieve a balanced budget moving forward. It was observed that reporting on the continuous improvement programme had not been presented to the Committee and there was a need for Member transparency.

The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) reassured Members that the programme was underway and part of officer's everyday work. There had been issues finding figures, to map against the performance indicator due to rising costs, which in turn lead to reviews of what needed to be saved. The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) agreed that a better indicator was required and would take comments on board.

The chair appreciated that with changing costs, monitoring of this PI was difficult to monitor.

- Members queried the percentage of 90.3% in relation to PI 69 and sought clarification as to what happened with the remaining 9.7% of requests and what this shortfall converted to, in terms of cases. The Information Governance Manager explained that the shortfall Q3 related to a delay of email delivery, due to a server issue, plus other unavoidable information delays relating to external contractors. It was noted that there had been no FOI requests rejected in Q3. In terms of the overall number of cases in the 9.7%, the Information Governance did not have the figure at hand but would look to include this in future reporting.
- Clarification was sought to who sat on the Information Governance & Security Group (IGSG) and when the outcomes would be reported. Members were informed that the group consisted of the Director (Corporate Services), Head of Digital & IT, the Information Governance Manager, members of the ICT team and HR. The data protection policy which required Member approval had been updated in January 2023 and would be reviewed again in 2025.

The Committee noted the report.

17. Annual Review of the Information Governance Shared Service

Members were presented with the annual review that has been conducted in respect of the Information Governance Shared Service with Medway Council.

The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) provided a summary of the report, updating that in recent years the team had experienced recruitment and retention issues due to the specialist nature of the work. As a result, there had been a need to make use of temporary staff to maintain service delivery. It was noted that as a consequence of this, the anticipated cost would exceed budget provision for 2023/24. Actions to respond to the recruitment challenges were outlined in the report. The team continued to provide resilient service, despite the recruitment and retention challenges faced.

The Committee noted the report.

18. Revenues and Benefits Service Update

The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) gave the Committee a Revenues and Benefits service update:

- Members were informed that the team were currently in their busiest time of year with the annual billing calculations for council tax, benefits and non-domestic rates (business rates). Members were informed that 44,853 Council tax bills were generated, and 2,305 business rates bills had been sent.

- The new Council tax bills from 1 April 2024 would reflect recent changes to empty property premiums. There was now a 100% premium applied to all properties that had been empty for over one year. This had previously only applied to properties empty for over 2 years. There would also no longer be a 12-month 100% discount for uninhabitable properties.

Work had been carried out to ensure residents were aware of the changes. Letters had been sent to residents in advance of the new bills and the Council's website had been updated with information on the new charges.

Inspections were undertaken on empty properties, in order to provide any evidence to support empty charges being raised.

- The Committee were updated that the non-domestic rate bills would reflect the continuation of the 75% retail, hospitality and leisure reduction where appropriate. It was noted that to qualify, the business must meet exacting funding considerations.
- Members were advised that to date the collections for 2023/24 provided an outturn of 96.1% for Council tax and 96.4% for non-domestic rates.
- Work had been carried out throughout the year to claim back historic Council tax arrears. To date £1,170,000 Council tax revenue had been recouped and £1,080,000 for business rates.
- The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) updated that Housing Benefit claims were being migrated to Universal Credit (UC). This had been on the agenda for many years and GBC had one of the highest number of cases already migrated. It was estimated that Gravesham had 720 cases of the total 3,055 claims to move across to UC by the end of September 2023. The DWP would be the issuing Migration Notices to the affected claimants. It was very important the public responded to the DWP, to gain transitional protection. There were also plans with Gravesham's communications team, to undertake a targeted response to make sure those needing to move to UC were aware.

The migration would leave Gravesham Housing Benefit claims active only for the more complex cases, such as temporary accommodation, supported accommodation, pensioners, and some ESA cases.

- Members were informed that the Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) awarded by central Government was £178, 908 for 2024/25 and an additional £75,000 had been awarded from HSF4 funding which had been added to the DHP budget. There had been a 25% rise in applications to 514 cases, for DHP by end of February 2024 and the Council had awarded £224,000 (90%) to 185 tenants provided security of tenure.
- The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) updated Members on the Low-Income Family Tracker (LIFT), which was used to measure the number of households living in relative poverty. It was noted that in the past year, the number of households in relative poverty had dropped by 336 properties from 2,845 to 2,509. This had in some part been due to the low-income family tracker. The council had been able to:
 - support 131 families in providing funding totalling £30,000 for clothing for 270 children.
 - Provided £120,000 of household support to 564 households, assisting with energy bills.
 - Ensure security of tenure for 56 vulnerable households by paying £75,000 towards household costs.

- Pay £70,000 in financial support payments to over 100 vulnerable households to cover council tax debts.
- 74 pension-age households were now in receipt of pension credit due to the Council's intervention. This equates to an additional £313,000 per annum.

Members of the Committee were invited to ask questions or make comment on the report:

- Members of the Committee commended the work of the LIFT noting that support was life saving for local families and delivered positive outcomes.
- It was observed by Members that new members of senior housing staff were not aware of the LIFT and that training should be provided. The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) ensured that training would be undertaken and there would also be a Member video created about LIFT.
- A Member highlighted that Watford Council had experienced issues with their billing systems in relation to Council tax bills and requested reassurance that this would not be the case at Gravesham. The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) advised that most authorities used the same sort of system. It was unclear which system Watford used but Gravesham uses NEC (Northgate). He highlighted that it was an extensive task producing the annual bills and human error could occur, which may have been the case in the example of Watford. In relation to Gravesham, there were specific controls and parameters in place to support the issues of annual bills, which was reconciled and signed off by more than one officer.
- Following cases of a Ukrainian refugee receiving council tax enforcement action, assurance was sought that this incident would not occur in the future with apologies sent to those effected. The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) advised that the problem had arisen, due to the Council being notified of the individuals occupying the properties, plus the complexities of establishing those who qualified not to pay Council tax. GBC were only aware of a very small number of Ukrainians, that fell under the Homes for Ukraine information provided by KCC. If an apology had not already been sent in this case, then one would be issued and an up-to-date list sought from Housing service/KCC.
- Clarity was sought regarding the allocation of funds to support those in need within the local community. The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) explained that officers followed a strict DHP policy to allocate funds fairly, ensuring that tenures were kept. There would be an expectation for the resident to find somewhere smaller to live if appropriate and the Council could pay part of their rent through DHP. There may be cases of arrears, which would also be supported in the short term. Officers were dealing with a finite sum of money, so it was essential to distribute with caution, looking at each case on its own merit, to assist as many households as possible.

The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) informed Members that Gravesham had been able to supplement the DHP budget by allocating £75K from the household support fund, meaning more residents were able to maintain security of tenure. The household support was used to assist with energy bill payments, welfare support, provision of food banks and not directly for rent. Allocation of funds had been targeted using the LIFT system thereby reducing potential homelessness. To provide context, the £75K was taken from a total allocation of £420K, provided for the Housing Support Fund.

The Committee noted the report.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.40pm